

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four O - Part 1: Shifting Sands

by *The Space Witches*



Curiosity can kill the cat... or its loved ones.

Chapter 2

20th August 2272

Excalibur - night

Dureena sat on the side of the bed, looking down at her sleeping partner, and she smiled. He was asleep at last, his face wiped clean of anxiety and confusion for the first time since they'd returned to the Excalibur. Poor Max had been badly shaken by the events of the day. John's scan had almost completed the mental collapse that had been progressing slowly over the weeks since the archeologist had found the Box.

The little thief leaned forward and kissed the older man gently on the forehead, secure in John's reassurance that Max would soon recover from the mental injuries inflicted on him, once the creature was recaptured. Just thinking about what it had done to Max made Dureena angry. Her yellow eyes glowed with the need for revenge on the thing that had hurt her lover.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Dureena told herself that she had to be content with the revenge Illas was taking on their behalf, trapping the creature in the Box for all eternity. If Dureena could have made that imprisonment excruciatingly painful, she would have done so.

Stroking the archeologist's thinning hair, Dureena smiled sadly as she recalled the effort Max had made to appear normal when the Excalibur had arrived. He had managed to recover some of the characteristics of the old Max she loved so much when he had joined her and Brennan at their first meeting with the Captain. He'd even kept up the pretence when Gideon had joined them back on the planet.

After the Captain's threat to close down the expedition, Max had crumpled into Dureena's arms, almost whimpering that he couldn't allow that to happen. "Not yet, Dureena, he mustn't do that yet. I have to finish my work on the chest. I have to finish." Dureena now realized that his confusion and distress had been caused by the creature's malign influence.

Dureena had been glad that Ilas and the children had remained on the Excalibur, and hadn't witnessed Max's mental disintegration. After a few hours, he had pulled himself together and gone to study the chest again, leaving the thief to wait for the Captain. During that time Dureena had reached a conclusion. She had decided she had to lead Gideon to the chest. It felt like a betrayal of her partner, but it was for his own good. She and Ilas could no longer continue to watch silently while Max fragmented mentally.

After John's scan, Dureena and Ilas had brought Max back to their quarters, where Vya joined them soon after, bringing his baby sister with him. Ilas had sat with Max while Dureena had put the children to bed, and then the little shape-shifter had left to join the Captain in the conference room.

When Ilas had returned, she had explained to Dureena and the uncomprehending Max what would happen next. The thief hadn't been happy about the risk their partner would take in participating in the creature's capture, but she had been forced to agree that it was necessary, and that Ilas could look after herself. Max hadn't seemed able to take in what was being said, and had clung to Ilas, begging her not to leave.

Finally, Dureena had taken her lover into her arms and held him, while Ilas left, her face full of pain and regret, to carry out her task. Soon after, Max had started to quiet, and eventually Dureena had got him to rest and sleep.

Max's breathing was deep, slow and steady, and Dureena could see that he would sleep for hours, so she stood and left the bedroom, silent as a cat. She paused for a moment in the living area, then decided to check on the children. Moving silently into the second bedroom, she stopped at the cot where Ilori slept peacefully.

The little thief leaned over the side of the cot and gently stroked her ten-month-old daughter's thick, dark hair. This was the only baby Dureena would ever bear. Her internal organs had been so badly damaged by losing her first child late in her pregnancy that she should never have been able to carry another, so Ilori was her little miracle. She loved the tiny girl with a fierce intensity, despite her having been produced with the aid of a Technomage. The thief still felt she owed a debt to Alwyn for his help in the conception and carrying of her daughter, but that debt didn't sit comfortably on her soul. To admit that she owed anything to a Technomage was difficult--after Galen had helped the murderer of her first child, Dureena hated all Technomages--but Ilori made it all worthwhile. No one would ever harm this child or take her away. Dureena would kill anyone who tried.

Moving over to the bed where Vya slept, Dureena smiled as she saw the little boy had pulled the covers up over his head again, so all she could see was a hump of bedclothes. She sometimes wondered how he could breathe with the blankets piled up on top of him like that. The thief reached out and gently pulled back the covers, expecting to see Vya's bright blue head resting on the pillow.

There was no head to be seen, only a pillow. Dureena frowned, pulling the covers back further, and found the bed empty. Pillows had been stuffed under the blankets to make it appear that the little boy was asleep in bed.

Fear made Dureena feel sick for a moment, then she turned and ran through to the living area, quickly keying the commlink there. Lt. Siddhartha answered almost immediately, and the thief asked if Commander Matheson was still on duty. Receiving the Lieutenant's confirmation, Dureena asked to speak to him urgently.

As soon as John's face appeared on the screen, Dureena said, "John, Vya is missing. You have his physical characteristics on file. Can you scan the ship for him?"

John nodded and gave a quiet order to someone off screen. Long seconds passed, during which fear and anxiety built inside the thief. Finally, John turned back to the screen, frowning. "There's no sign of him on the scanners, Dureena, but he can change his form so completely that he could be masquerading as another species. Is it OK with you if I do a quick mental scan? I know his mental signature, and that won't change, no matter what form he's in."

Dureena nodded quickly, watching as John closed his eyes. After a few moments of concentration, the Commander opened his eyes again. Now he looked as anxious as Dureena felt.

"He's not on the ship, Dureena. He must have stowed away on the shuttle and gone down to the planet."

Cygnus 36 - early morning

Gideon leaped to his feet and turned to run out of Brennan's office, only half-aware that G'Tan was following closely. As the Captain ran down the main street, heading back to the IPX dig, all the pieces started to fall into place. Cursing himself for his stupidity, he ran flat out, hoping that he could get to his wife and her sisters before the creature did, but fearing that the thing had too great a lead.

[Galen will protect them. He has to.] Gideon said the words over and over, like a mantra, as he ran through the morning heat, hardly aware of the harsh sun beating down on his head.

The creature hung back in the shadows outside the room, trying to resist the pull of the spell the witches were weaving. It knew their plans, first from eavesdropping on Ilas as she'd explained to Max and Dureena what they intended, then in more detail when it had stowed away on the shuttle.

It had laughed silently to itself then, secure in the knowledge that nothing the witches could do would affect it. It had been wrong. The lure of the spell was almost overwhelming. It sang to the creature, beckoning it forward, like sirens seducing it toward rocks of oblivion. The luminosity ascending from the Box drew the creature's spirit, lighting a path for its return to the void.

Peeking out of the darkness that hid the body it inhabited, the creature could see the lines of fire that laced the area between the witches and the Technomage. It saw the distortion in the air that indicated the presence of the force field protecting them all. It knew that if it touched that field, or allowed its physical body to come into contact with the lines of fire, all its strength would be drained out of it, and it would be sucked back into the Box. It could not allow that to happen.

Fortunately, its eavesdropping on the shuttle had given it the information it needed to prevent that outcome. It knew the moves it needed to make to turn this trap back on its creators. Soon the witches would provide it with all the energy it needed, and it would never again have to fear the prison of the Box.

Creeping from the shadows, the creature entered the room, staying close to the walls as it circled the figures in the center. They appeared not to have noticed its entrance. All five had their eyes closed and their arms extended, totally focused on the spell that dragged at the creature's core. It became more difficult to resist with every moment that passed. The creature knew it had to attack now, before it was too late.

Drawing the dagger it had stolen from the red headed witch's rooms, the creature leaped at the Technomage. It plunged the knife deep into Galen's back, using its full weight to drag the blade downward, feeling the grating of metal against bone as the dagger sliced down the Technomage's ribs.

Galen let out a scream of pain and collapsed forward. The women echoed his scream, and the lines of fire were broken as they too collapsed. The shimmering force field vanished, and the creature struck again. As it did so, the metal blade made contact with something hard in the Technomage's back, and a great shock of electricity shot through the creature, throwing it clear. It landed like a cat on all fours, then leaped back onto the Technomage, plunging the dagger into him again and again, slicing through the black coat that covered his back until his skin was exposed to its knife. The creature was startled by the metallic implants it could see embedded in the flesh, and it was careful to avoid touching them with the blade, as it continued slashing and stabbing at the fallen man.

When the dagger was slippery with blood and twisting in its grasp, the creature turned its attention to the women. As it had anticipated, when Galen had fallen, the pain fed back through their connection with the Technomage had overwhelmed the witches. His agony had been transmitted through their link, bringing them to their knees.

The creature smiled maliciously as it flung aside the dagger, then moved to feed on its first victim. It had worked out the order in which it planned to kill the witches. First it would suck the red head dry, then move onto the raven-haired woman, before finishing its feast with the blonde. Having consumed the life force of all three women, it would have the power it needed to switch bodies, taking that of the adult shape-shifter. It would then turn and finish its meal by consuming what little life remained in the Technomage, and finally that of its former host.

Leaping onto the back of the red head, it yanked her thick mane of hair aside, exposing the pale nape of her neck, and lowered its mouth to start feeding from her life energies. As it sucked in the first delicious draft, it sensed movement to one side.

The creature snarled as it saw the blonde witch crawling toward it. She had grasped the discarded dagger, and was brandishing it as she pulled herself across the floor, her face suffused with fury and hatred. Lengthening and strengthening its arm, the creature struck out at the blonde, smashing a massive fist into the side of her face with a force that lifted her body off the ground, tossing her to the far side of the room, where she collapsed motionless against the wall.

With a malicious smile, the creature surveyed the still bodies that littered the floor and returned to its feeding.

Gideon ran full speed into the room, appalled by what he saw there. Galen was face down on the floor,

his back a mess of blood that spread into a pool around his body. Angel and Ilas had both collapsed, unconscious, while Deborah was flung against the wall, her face swollen and bruised. He took a step toward her, then a snarling sound attracted his attention back to the shadows.

Vya was hunched on Lily's back, his head lifted and staring at the Captain, his teeth bared. Lily was face down and completely motionless, and for a moment Gideon wondered if she was already dead. Without thinking, he leaped at Vya, grabbing the shape-shifter, and trying to yank him off Lily's back.

As he grasped Vya's shoulder, the child shifted. Suddenly, Gideon was no longer holding a small boy with blue hair, but a four limbed reptile, with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and hands tipped with what seemed like dozens of sharp claws.

The reptile grabbed Gideon's jacket and neatly flipped the Captain onto his back. Gideon found himself staring up into a maw spread wide by glistening fangs, as he struggled to hold onto the arms of his attacker to prevent himself being clawed.

Suddenly, G'Tan's giant form appeared over the reptile's shoulder and the Narn wrenched it free, throwing it across the room. Gideon was horrified to see it shift its shape in mid air, assuming the form of a large cat-like creature, which landed gracefully, and launched itself straight back at the Marine.

G'Tan had dropped his rifle on entering the room, and Gideon realized the Narn was trying not to harm the creature attacking him, knowing that the body was that of an innocent child.

[Fuck that!] Gideon leaped to his feet and lunged across the room, grabbing the PPG rifle, and spinning back to fire on the creature. [I'll hit it somewhere non-fatal, and Luke can fix it later.] Before he could raise the weapon, it was knocked from his hands, and he found himself facing the creature again. G'Tan lay on his back in the middle of the floor, unconscious, bleeding from the deep claw marks that raked his face.

Gideon charged forward, trying to knock the creature off its feet so he could pin it to the ground. He knew that whatever shape it took, it retained the same mass, and that was less than his. If he could get on top of the thing, he just might be able to overpower it with his weight.

The creature avoided his charge, and Gideon was never quite sure if it had moved like lightening, or if it had shifted form to avoid him. Whichever, he missed his target, and felt the creature land on his back. The Captain twisted, reaching over his shoulder, dragging Vya up and over his head, and slamming him into the floor.

It made little difference. The creature wasn't even winded. It leaped up and attacked Gideon again, shifting back into the reptilian form, and once again the Captain found himself on his back on the floor, staring up into a mouthful of fangs, knowing that this time there was no one to come to his rescue.

Saliva dripped from the creature's mouth and splashed onto Gideon's face, burning where it touched. He howled with pain and bucked hard, arching his back to try to shift his attacker. It was useless. Vya had him pinned and was now lowering his mouth to rip out the Captain's throat. Gideon struggled again and was rewarded by a sideswipe from the creature's claws, which ripped open his shoulder. Howling with pain again, Gideon knew this was his last chance. He was now bleeding profusely from the wound and he knew he would weaken rapidly from blood loss. He heaved once more, but to no avail. The fangs descended.

Gideon closed his eyes and waited for death.

A blast of sound was accompanied by the smell of burning flesh and a scream of pain. Gideon felt the weight of the creature lifted from him, and he struggled to sit up and see what had happened.

Alwyn stood in the center of the room, a red light beaming from the end of his staff. The light wrapped itself around the creature, imprisoning its limbs, gradually tightening until it was confined inside a cage of light. It hissed and screamed, writhing and squirming around, trying to escape its fiery bonds.

Movement in the doorway attracted the Captain's attention and he heaved a sigh of relief as he saw Sarah Chambers rush in behind the older Technomage. At that moment she looked like an angel of mercy, arrived in the nick of time to save them all. Sarah took one swift look around the room, and ran to Galen, placing her fingers to his neck and pausing as she tried to find a pulse.

Gideon struggled to his knees, and started to crawl across the room toward his wife, dripping blood from his shoulder wound as he edged slowly forward. Deborah lay unmoving on her side, but her face had swollen and bruised further since the Captain had first entered the room. He told himself that was good. She must still be alive.

A groan, followed by another, alerted Gideon to his Marine Sergeant regaining consciousness. The big Narn sat upright, shaking his head, scattering blood droplets around the room.

Sarah called out sharply. "Matt, stop moving. Those claws could have venom in them. Lie down and keep still. G'Tan, get over here and help me."

Gideon collapsed gratefully by his wife's side, gently pulling at her until her head lay in his lap. He looked down at her, whispering, "Don't die on me. You promised you'd never leave me, and this is no time to break your promises." Stroking her hair gently, the Captain looked up to see that Angel was now sitting up, also shaking her head.

Sarah barked another order, and Gideon realized that she'd now moved over to Lily, and was pulling things out of a bag she carried with her. "Angel, get over to Matt and do whatever you can to stop the bleeding. I think the claws clipped an artery. He'll bleed to death if we can't get it under control."

Angel nodded, and crawled across the floor toward where Gideon lay propped against the wall. She seemed to be moving incredibly slowly, but then the Captain realized that his perceptions were becoming distorted. His sight blurred and sounds faded in and out. He wondered if this was because of blood loss, or whether Vya's claws had indeed been poisoned. For some reason, it seemed very important that he should know exactly what was killing him.

He heard fragments of speech from different people around the room.

*"Doctor, I need help here. I can't get this bleeding under control." That was G'Tan, which seemed odd somehow, as he was way over the other side of the room and it was Gideon who was bleeding to death, wasn't it? Then he remembered Galen. [That must be it. Looks like I'm going out with an honor guard. Or maybe I'm *his* honor guard. Dammit, I'm a Captain, not a guardsman! Come on! After saving Earth, don't you think I deserve an honor guard? Perhaps even a marching band, playing the EF Hymn?]* Opening his eyes, Gideon saw the Narn bending over the Technomage. Ilas was now at Sarah's side, helping the doctor with whatever they were doing to Lily.

Gideon shook his head as another fragment of speech registered.

"I'm pumping as many stimulants as I dare into her, Alwyn, but she's not responding. She's still alive but..." Sarah's voice faded, and Gideon's world went gray for a few moments. When he came back, another voice was speaking. A deeper, male voice. Alwyn.

"...doing the right thing. I can't help you, Sarah. I have to keep hold of this thing until I can reactivate the room's controls. Just another few..." The voice faded again.

Another voice spoke, softer, but closer. Angel. She sounded fierce but scared.

"Will you please stop bleeding, Captain? You know the sight of blood makes me sick, and you're getting it all over me. If you don't stop soon, I'm going to have to take my shirt off and use it as a bandage."

Gideon managed a weak grin, whispering, "Promise?" before finally losing his grasp on consciousness.

21st August 2272

Excalibur - early morning

The gray lifted slowly and Gideon opened his eyes to find himself in a Medbay side-room. For a moment, he wondered what he was doing there, and tried to sit upright in bed. The shaft of pain that stabbed through his left shoulder reminded him of what had happened, and he fell back, gritting his teeth to stop himself yelling out. Looking down, he could see that his left arm had been placed in a sling, immobilizing it against his chest. Someone had removed his uniform and he was dressed in Medbay pajamas. At least this time they hadn't hooked him up to any humiliating equipment.

The soft sound of snoring drew his attention to his right, where he saw another bed had been squeezed in next to his. Deborah laid there, on her back, her mouth slightly open, her breathing just deep enough to call a snore. A wave of relief and affection swept through Gideon. If she was snoring, she was alive.

Manipulating the bed control with his right hand, the Captain brought the back more upright, then carefully leaned across to look at his wife's face. The left side was still a little swollen, but all the bruising was gone. He realized that someone must have treated her with a regenerator. Gideon reached out and gently stroked Deborah's swollen cheek, wishing his stiff shoulder didn't stop him leaning across to kiss her.

The noise of a throat being cleared made him turn to look at the doorway, where Sarah Chambers stood, dressed in her old Medbay coverall, smiling.

Gideon smiled anxiously back. "Is she going to be all right?" He was relieved when Sarah nodded.

"She had a fractured cheekbone, and a broken jaw, but we put the pieces back together, then reduced the swelling and bruising with a regenerator. She also had a nasty concussion, but she'll be fine in a few hours. Just let her sleep."

Gideon closed his eyes in silent thanks, then leaned across to stroke his wife's hair, before turning his full attention to the doctor, asking, "And what about the others? Is everyone else OK?"

Sarah's face fell into more serious lines. "Angel and Ilas are fine, physically anyway. Angel's with the

children in the crèche. They're all still asleep. When they wake up, Angel will tell them their mothers are sleeping after the trip to the planet. That should stop them panicking when they can't link to Demon and Lily."

Gideon nodded, knowing that Marcus couldn't read Angel's emotions any more than Deborah could. She was the only person on the ship who could lie to his son and get away with it.

Sarah continued, "Ilas has gone back to tell Max and Dureena what's happened. She's distraught." The doctor shook her head sadly, "Matt, we have to find a way to release Vya. They've already lost one child; we can't let them lose another."

The Captain held his right hand out to the doctor, and she came across the room to sit on the edge of his bed, squeezing his hand tightly as he said, "We'll find a way, Sarah. We'll get Vya back." Gideon just wished he had any idea how they were going to do that. Shaking his head free of doubts, he asked Sarah to tell him about the others.

She smiled, "G'Tan is fine. The shape Vya assumed when he clawed G'Tan didn't have venom in its claws. His face got ripped, and he refuses to let us regenerate him, so we've glued his skin back together and sent him off to his quarters. He'll have a few more scars to show off to the ladies, but otherwise he'll be fine."

Gideon snorted softly. "G'Tan doesn't need any more help attracting female company. As far as I know he fathered every one of the pouchlings on board himself."

Sarah laughed, but then her face fell into more serious lines. "Galen was badly hurt. He had over fifty knife wounds in his back, and it's a minor miracle that none of them were fatal. One impact punctured his right lung, but most were slashing lacerations rather than deep penetrative wounds. It seems that Galen's implants protected him to some degree. They limited the area that Vya could attack. The biggest problem was blood loss. We pumped several units back into him, but it will take a while for the nanomites in his blood stream to replace themselves. Once they do, he should recover quickly." She gave Gideon a reassuring smile, but he could see the worry in her eyes, and he knew she'd saved the worst until last.

"And Lily? How is she?"

Sarah's smile faded. "She's in a coma, on full life support. Luke is with her. We've tried everything we know, but we can't rouse her."

Gideon swallowed hard. The idea of the little red head being kept alive by machines was inconceivable. Of all the sisters, Lily most epitomized life: loving, giving, generous in every way. The Captain had always been fond of the tiny woman, particularly since they had comforted each other in the absence of their loved ones a couple of years earlier. Gideon often wondered whether Lily's youngest daughter, Naima, was the result of the one night they had spent together then.

Pushing aside his many memories of Lily's liveliness, flirtatiousness, and love of life, he asked quietly, "Where's John? Is he with them? And why didn't he fire on the planet as I'd ordered him?" Gideon was relieved to find that he was still alive, but not exactly pleased that John hadn't followed his orders.

Sarah smiled, saying, "G'Tan and Angel called him soon after you passed out. They explained what had happened, persuaded John to cancel the firing order, and asked him to send down a shuttle to get everyone back. We could never have fitted all the stretchers into the one shuttle already down there." Her lips tightened as she continued, shaking her head, "That stubborn idiot of a telepath is now sitting on the

bridge, eating his heart out, saying he can't leave his station while you're not fit for duty."

Gideon started to pull himself more upright in bed, but before he could complete the move, Sarah pushed him back gently. "Don't even think about it, Matt. You're not fit to walk across the room, never mind command this ship. When Vya clawed you, he injected a nasty venom into the wound. It would have killed you if you hadn't bled so heavily. That washed most of the poison out of your system, but there was enough left to send you into toxic shock. Between that and blood loss, you're lucky to be alive."

Subsiding back onto his pillows, Gideon frowned up at the doctor. "Will you at least let me make a couple of calls?" He had to admit that even the attempt to sit upright unaided had left his head spinning.

Sarah nodded and activated the view screen on the far side of the room.

Gideon lay back and asked the computer to connect him to Lieutenant Jackson. A few minutes later, the screen lit up with the image of a rather tousled looking, dark-skinned woman. Jackson rubbed her eyes then grinned out of the screen. "Good to see you're awake, Captain. What can I do for you?"

The Captain smiled. "They won't let me leave Medbay, so I need you to go up to the bridge and throw Commander Matheson out of my chair. I'm going to call him in a minute and relieve him of duty."

Jackson laughed. "About time. I tried to get him to leave when the shuttles came back with you all on stretchers, but he wouldn't budge. I thought I may as well take a nap so I could be fresh when the Commander finally let me take over."

"Good thinking. Now get moving." Gideon gave her a sketchy salute with his free right hand and cut the connection. Next, he asked to be connected to the bridge, where Lt. Siddhartha took his call.

The dark, Asian woman's almond shaped eyes lit up when she saw who was calling. "Captain! You look much better than when you arrived back here a couple of hours ago."

Gideon groaned softly to himself. Had every member of his crew seen him unconscious and bleeding? "Thank you, Lieutenant. Now I need a small favor." As he explained what he needed, Siddhartha's excitement grew. She was almost bounding up and down in her seat by the time he'd finished, her thick braid of black hair bouncing off her shoulders as she nodded enthusiastically.

Gideon smiled. "Now put me through to Commander Matheson, and then go join him at the center seat." Siddhartha's braid bounced again, then she switched the call through to the Captain's station.

John's face filled the screen. He showed no emotion in his expression, but his eyes looked like two pools of pain, evidence of all the agony he refused to let his face convey. His voice was tight with controlled emotion as he said, "Captain. I'm happy to see you're recovering." John's tone was so formal, his words so precise and clipped, that Gideon wondered how he'd managed to squeeze them out through a throat tightened with strain and tension.

He shook his head sadly at the screen. "Recovered enough to tell you to get your butt off that bridge and down to Medbay, right now!" Gideon kept his own voice brisk, not letting the sympathy he felt show through.

John looked surprised, then he almost stuttered, "I can't...there's no one to...it's not..."

Siddhartha appeared behind him and laid a gentle hand on the Commander's shoulder as Gideon smiled and interrupted. "I'm relieving you of command, John. That's an order. Jackson is on her way up to the bridge, and Lt. Siddhartha can baby-sit until she gets there."

John's mouth opened, but Gideon continued without pausing. "No arguments. Let Sangeetha take over. When Jackson gets up there, the two of them can work out an alternating shift pattern and cover for us for a couple of days. We're deep in ISA space, nothing bad is going to happen, and it will look good on their résumés. Now move, Commander, before I'm forced to disobey medical orders, and come up there to throw you out of my chair."

John's face twitched into a half smile, then filled with gratitude, as he whispered, "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." The image on screen held long enough for Gideon to see his First Officer leap from his seat, before the connection broke.

The Captain snorted softly, "It's bad enough I have women running my life, now I have to hand over command of my ship to them, too." Looking over at Sarah, he could see she was smiling.

She said quietly, "Have I ever told you what a big softy you are, Matt?"

Gideon glowered at her, "No, and don't start now. You could ruin my reputation." Sarah laughed and stood, about to leave, but Gideon called her back. "Just a couple more things, then I promise I'll go back to sleep." Sarah sat down on the bed again, and gestured for him to continue.

"What brought you and Alwyn here? Your timing could have been better. About five minutes earlier would have been good, before we all got torn to shreds." He grinned to take the sting from his words and Sarah swatted his uninjured right arm lightly.

"When Demon called, Alwyn was off doing something 'technomagy'. I don't ask, and he doesn't always tell me what he's up to. I couldn't contact him at the time, so I called Galen instead, and he said he'd come straight here. Alwyn surprised me by turning up a few hours later. I told him about Demon's call, and he said he didn't like the sound of it. So we bundled Jaysen, Ishtar and her baby into Alwyn's ship and came here at top speed. As we came into land at the IPX site, we saw you and G'Tan running hell for leather through the ruins. Alwyn had his ship in stealth mode, so you didn't see us land and follow you."

Gideon nodded, saying quietly, "You'll never know how glad I am that you came. You saved our lives, Sarah. All of us." He leaned over to his right and again stroked his wife's cheek as she lay sleeping, still snoring softly. He knew he owed her an apology when she awoke. Her call to Sarah had saved them all. Gideon smiled to himself as he thought about how often Deborah would remind him of that little fact. He wondered just how many ways she'd find to say 'I told you so,' without ever actually using those words, and found he was deeply grateful that he would live long enough to find out.

He turned back as he heard Sarah sigh. "We still have to save Lily, Matt. I just wish I knew how." Her face was full of sadness and concern, and Gideon reached out to squeeze her hand. Sarah had always been driven to save everyone. Lily couldn't have a better doctor taking care of her. With Sarah there, Luke would be free to comfort John and stay with Lily, not distracted by his Medbay duties.

"You'll find a way, Sarah, and I'm sure Alwyn will help if he can. Is he back on the ship yet?"

Sarah shook her head. "He's still working on confining Vya. He thinks he'll be finished and able to get up here in a few hours. Then we just have to work out how to bring Lily back, and get rid of that thing

inside Vya." She stood abruptly and looked sternly at the Captain. "And you're not going to be much help unless you get some sleep."

Gideon smiled ingratiatingly. "Yes, Doctor. Just do me one last favor?" Sarah cocked her head to one side and waited for him to continue. "Help me out of this bed, so I can get in there with Deborah?"

Sarah laughed softly, saying, "It will be a squeeze, but OK," then did as he asked, before leaving him to sleep.

The Captain lay on his right side, his head on his wife's shoulder, and he kissed her neck gently, inhaling her scent before whispering, "Thanks for sticking around," and falling into a deep sleep.

John slid silently through the door of the Medbay Intensive Care Unit. Luke sat by the side of Lily's bed, his head bowed and his eyes closed. The sound of the door opening made Luke look up and John could see the pain in his partner's eyes. All he could think of was Lily's pet name for Luke: Sad-Eyes. The name could almost have been one of Lily's premonitions. It had never been more accurate than at that moment.

Ever since John had been told that Lily had been hurt, he'd been desperate to join her and Luke in Medbay, desperate to find out how badly she'd been injured, but his sense of loyalty and duty had bound him to the chair on the bridge. An hour after Lily had been brought back to the ship, Luke had called John, telling him quietly that their wife was in a deep coma, and all his attempts to revive her had so far been unsuccessful. Luke's voice had been unemotional, controlled, completely professional, but John knew that his partner was hurting as badly as he was.

The Commander had forced himself to stay seated, while every fiber of his being wanted to leave the bridge and rush to be with Luke and Lily. He had thanked Luke for the information, as coolly professional as the doctor. Neither had been able to allow their true feelings to show, as they both knew that once the emotional floodgates opened, it would be hard to close them again.

When Gideon had called and released John from his duty, the Commander had been forced to work doubly hard to prevent his emotions taking control. He'd run to the bullet car, using his command over-ride to ensure that it didn't stop between the bridge and Medbay. He'd stopped briefly outside the doors to ICU, taken a deep breath, and made sure he was totally in control before entering.

The sight of Lily, almost completely enclosed in the machinery that kept her alive, nearly undid him. Only her head was visible, her red hair cascading over the pillow. A black glass-like cocoon enveloped her from her feet to her shoulders, with light bars above, which strobed regularly up the length of her body. John didn't know much about how the life-support machine worked, but he knew the lights indicated that Lily was alive. As long as those lights kept moving, it meant the sensors were reading some brain activity, and the machine would continue to keep her lungs breathing, and her heart pumping. If brain function ceased, so would the lights, and an alarm would sound.

While the lights moved, some part of Lily--no matter how small--was still alive. John told himself repeatedly that where there was life there was hope. It was a cliché, but it was all he had to hang onto. He remembered Galen once saying that there was always hope. It was the one thing that no one had discovered how to destroy.

Luke pushed himself to his feet and turned to John, whispering, "I'm sorry. I've done everything I know how, but it's not enough. This is my fault; I should be able to..."

John flung himself across the room and pulled the doctor into his arms, sending waves of love and reassurance. [[This is NOT your fault, Luke. If anyone can save her, you will. I believe that; you have to believe it, too,]] he sent fiercely to his lover.

Luke collapsed completely, and cried into his partner's arms, the storm of emotions finally breaking. John held him until his sobs subsided, then led him back to his seat, kneeling beside him, holding his hand tightly. When Luke had regained control, he smiled sadly down at the Commander, whispering, "I'm OK now. You can stop being strong for me."

John lowered his head until it rested on Luke's thigh, feeling his lover's hand gently stroking his hair, as he finally allowed himself to weep. The pain and fear, the guilt and responsibility John had been carrying ever since he'd heard of Lily's injury, finally found release. Luke held him, one arm around John's shoulders, his hand continuing to stroke John's hair, until he recovered himself and looked up. His lover's eyes were sadder than ever, full of compassion and love. John said, "Thanks. Now tell me how she really is. Don't try to sugarcoat it. Tell me the honest truth."

Luke swallowed and clutched John's hand tightly. "She's like the others from the planet, except that she's still alive. Barely. There are no external marks, no apparent injuries, but it's as if the life has been drained out of her. All her internal organs have just stopped working. Without the machines," he waved at the black cocoon in which Lily rested, "she'd die in minutes. If Sarah hadn't been down there on the planet, Lily would never have made it back to the ship alive."

John closed his eyes, telling himself that he'd asked for this. He needed to know the truth. He just hadn't expected the truth to be so painful. Luke paused, waiting for John to regain control. John patted his hand, then managed a twisted smile to indicate that the doctor should continue. "Between Sarah and Ilas, they kept her breathing and her heart beating, until we could get her on life support. We've been able to detect some very low-level brain activity, so we know Lily is still alive. Some part of her is hanging on, but when Ilas and Angel tried to link to her, they couldn't get any response. Wherever Lily is, she's so far away that even her sisters can't reach her."

John squeezed Luke's hand again, sensing that the doctor's emotions were changing. John wasn't sure whether it was a good thing or not, but Luke's despair was gradually turning to anger. His voice hardened as he said, "Sarah and I kept working on her, using every trick we both know, using every piece of technology this ship has, and we failed. We failed, John!"

Luke stood abruptly, turning and starting to pace the length of the room, back and forth like a caged animal, ranting as he went. "What use is all the training, all my experience in ER? What good is being a doctor if I can't do anything for the people I love most? If Lily dies it will be my fault, because I'm just not good enough to save her!"

John stood quickly and pulled his lover back into a firm embrace, shaking him into silence. "Stop it! No one could do more for Lily than you have. And she's still alive. She hasn't left us yet, and she won't. We may not be able to hear her, but we can try to reach her, to help her hear us. Now give me your hand."

The Commander pulled his partner back over to the bed where their lover lay motionless. Pushing Luke to stand on one side of the bed, he moved to the other, then reached across to join hands. He placed his free hand over Lily's temple and indicated that Luke should do the same on her other side. When they were both touching Lily and each other, John closed his eyes and sent, [[Join me.]]

He felt Luke's mind open to his, and for a moment the pain and guilt he felt there nearly overwhelmed him. Stiffening his resolve, John opened his own mind and took Luke in. They could never merge as completely as the sisters did, losing their own identities to create a new persona, but they could blend their love, increasing it until it became more than the sum of the parts. John wove their love for each other, their love for Lily, and their love for their children into a powerful, shining beacon of light and hope, which he sent deep into the recesses of Lily's mind.

It was like walking through a deep, dark cavern. Empty, echoing, cold. The warmth and light of Lily's mind had departed, leaving barren emptiness behind, and John nearly despaired. He felt the cold and darkness wrapping around him, dragging him down, draining the life and love out of him, and he nearly lost himself in hopelessness.

Then a voice he knew as well as his own echoed in his mind. Dark brown, warm, soft, like velvet, the voice whispered, [[Look! There!]]

John had no idea how he knew where to look, but he did, and he saw a glimmer, a tiny light almost swallowed by the surrounding gloom. The light danced in the darkness, and something of the way it moved reminded John of how Lily danced, how she swayed and twirled, light on her feet, and full of life and energy.

[[LILITH!]] His sending was doubled and redoubled by the support of Luke's love, his voice blended with Luke's, until they became one and indistinguishable, a single surge of pure devotion.

The light strengthened and moved toward them, touching them, soothing them, somehow reassuring them, and they felt loved and cherished in return. Then the light was gone, and only darkness remained.

John opened his eyes abruptly, gasping for breath, trying not to choke on misery and desolation. Luke looked across at him and his eyes reflected the same desperation. Then they both saw that the light bars above the machine enclosing Lily were still moving. She was still alive, but for the moment withdrawn from them, conserving her energies.

Luke gripped John's hand tightly. "She's still with us, John. She's hanging on. We just have to work out how to release her."

John nodded slowly, trying to recapture the moment of optimism when he had first sensed the light of Lily's mind. He did his best to smile across at his partner, then moved a chair to the other side of Lily's bed and sat, one hand stroking her fiery red hair, the other reaching across and holding Luke's hand tightly.

They sat in silence for hours, holding onto their remaining shreds of hope. Eventually, John took a deep breath and looked across at his partner, his voice full of pain as he asked, "What are we going to tell the children?"

Excalibur - late morning

Gideon woke to the sensation of his nose being tickled. He opened his eyes slowly, and smiled as he saw his wife's face smiling down at him. Her smile was a little uneven. One side of her face was still swollen and stiff, but it was still the most beautiful smile the Captain had ever seen.

He reached up and brushed aside the lock of hair Deborah had been using to tickle his nose, saying, "You decided to wake up, then? I thought I'd take a brief nap while I waited for you."

Deborah snorted softly, and said, "I'd hardly call it a nap. You've been snoring so loud, the whole ship was vibrating."

Gideon grinned up at her. "You're hardly in a position to comment. When I first woke up, you were flat on your back, fast asleep, looking like an angel fallen from heaven, and the way you were snoring made it clear why they'd kicked you out. The other angels had a vote and decided they couldn't stand the noise any more."

Deborah started to laugh, then quickly held her hand to the side of her face. "Ow! Don't make me laugh. It still hurts!"

Gideon sat up and kissed his wife gently on her swollen cheek. "Did you land on your nose when you fell from above? Just my luck to get an angel with a sinus problem." Deborah chuckled again, then pulled the Captain close, burying her head into his shoulder.

They held each other tightly for a moment, then Gideon pushed Deborah back with his free hand, saying, "Talking of angels, I believe your sister is looking after our son. If we dress quickly, we can sneak out of here, relieve Angel of one of her charges, and get back to our quarters, before Sarah spots us and tells us we can't leave."

Deborah smiled, then closed her eyes, her face assuming the soft smile Gideon always associated with her linking with her sisters. After a few seconds she opened her eyes and smiled at her husband. "Angel says that Marcus has been quite good for once, but she'd be very grateful if we'd take him now. She needs all her attention for Lily's three." Her smile faded and her eyes filled with tears as she spoke of her little sister. "Matthew, what..."

Before she could complete her sentence, Gideon pulled her close in his arms and hugged her tightly. "Shh. I know about Lily, and we'll find a way, OK? Somehow."

*Deborah squeezed him in return, burying her head in his shoulder while she tried to pull herself back under control. Gideon held her tightly, stroking her hair, and kissing the top of her head gently. When she finally stopped sobbing, she pushed herself back, sniffing loudly, saying, "OK, I can't do anything about this for now, so I'll concentrate on the things I *can* do. Do you know where our clothes are, or do we have to walk the corridors like this?" She looked down at her pajamas, then managed a half-smile at her husband.*

Gideon laughed and reached out to wipe the tears from her cheeks, then indicated a closet on the far side of the room. He helped Deborah out of bed with his free hand, then watched as she stripped off her pajamas, and walked across to the locker. The sight of his wife's naked butt held a never-ending appeal to the Captain, and he was smiling again as she turned and brought their clothes back to the bed. This time he got the full impact of her naked breasts, swaying gently as she walked toward him.

Following his gaze downwards, Deborah tutted her disapproval. "Matthew Gideon, you have a one track mind."

Gideon forced his eyes up to her face, smiling and saying, "And you don't? Come on; help me get this top off, will you?"

Deborah quickly dressed herself, then helped him take his left arm from the sling that held it in place. She eased his top over his head, while Gideon quietly cursed with pain at every move. When he stood naked in front of her, Deborah leaned in and gently kissed the scars left on his shoulder by Vya's claws.

When she looked up at him, her eyes had filled with tears again. "You were hurt saving us, weren't you?" Gideon nodded and she kissed the scars again, whispering, "Thank you. My knight in shining armor."

Gideon laughed gently. "I wish I *had* been wearing shining armor! I wouldn't be trying to dress myself one-handed now."

His wife smiled again, careful not to twist her face where it was still sore. Then she winked, saying, "Usually I prefer you naked, but on this occasion I'll make an exception." She helped Gideon on with his pants, eased a T-shirt over his head and shoulders, then dropped to her knees to help him with his socks and shoes. When he was finally dressed, she stood quickly, saying, "Come on. Let's see if the other man in my life needs help getting his shoes tied."

Gideon took her hand and they slid quietly across to the Medbay crèche to collect their son.

22nd August 2272

Excalibur - early morning

Ilas looked down at Ilori as she held the baby girl in her arms, and felt her eyes fill with tears. She adored this little girl, her child by Dureena, but she didn't have the same bond with Ilori as she had with Vya. Ilas was father to Ilori, but she was Vya's mother. She had carried Vya within her own body for nearly a year, bonding to him, linking to him, shaping his genes until he too could shape-shift, just like his mother.

Vya had grown rapidly over the previous three years, and just like his mother, had matured more quickly than human or even Zanderi children. While the mental link between mother and son had diminished over time, Ilas and Vya had still been able to send to each other when in close physical proximity. Ilas couldn't help wondering how she could have missed the change in her son in recent weeks.

With hindsight, she could see that Vya's behavior had altered. He had spent less time with his parents, and more time wandering around the archeological dig and the mining colony. Ilas had just thought he was curious, and had been proud of the keen intelligence her little boy had displayed in the questions he'd asked and the comments he'd made. Now she knew the reason for those questions. Vya hadn't been asking them. The monster that had stolen his body had been the curious one.

A wave of anger swept through Ilas as she thought back on what had happened down on the planet. As part of the merge, she had felt the appalling pain when Galen had been attacked, and lost consciousness. When she had come around, the shape-shifter had been totally confused.

She had expected to see Brennan's body on the floor, and her sisters and Galen standing around her. Instead, she had awoken to chaos. Galen was seriously injured, with a bleeding G'Tan trying to help him. Demon was unconscious in the arms of the Captain, who was also bleeding heavily, his left shoulder badly clawed. Sarah Chambers had appeared from somewhere and was kneeling next to Lily. At the thought of her littlest sister, Ilas had to swallow quickly. It had been obvious that Lily had been badly hurt, and Ilas had scrambled to help the doctor.

Barely aware of what was happening elsewhere in the room, Ilas had at first focused entirely on following Chamber's instructions on how to keep Lily alive. She'd heard Sarah tell Angel to help the Captain, but it was only in a moment of respite that the shape-shifter had looked away from her little sister. She had then seen Alwyn standing at the far end of the room, struggling with a form that was confined in a cage of red light. Ilas had been appalled when she had realized that it was her son who was in combat with the Technomage. She had leaped to her feet, ready to defend her child, when Sarah had dragged her back down, quickly explaining what had happened, and telling Ilas that if she left Lily at that moment, her sister would die.

Ilas had felt as if she were being torn apart. Both her son and her sister had needed her. Sarah had never stopped working on Lily, pumping her chest, injecting her with stimulants, while Ilas kept trying to breathe for the little red head. She had listened in horror as the doctor had told her how the spirit that had escaped from the Box had possessed Vya.

The next few moments had been the worst of Ilas' life. Worse even than when Dureena's first child had been murdered before he was born. The shape-shifter had been forced to choose between saving her sister and going to the aid of her child. She had made herself stay with Lily, telling herself over and over that it was not her son who struggled against Alwyn. It was just his body. Not his soul, not his spirit, not his personality, not everything that made Vya who he was.

Even now, Ilas had to remind herself that her son was trapped in the Apocalypse Box on the planet below, and now Lily was out of immediate danger, she should focus on how to release him. As far as Ilas could tell, the only people likely to be able to help her were the Technomages, and one of them was clinging to life in Medbay.

Ilas had wanted to stay on the planet with Alwyn, but Sarah had told her that Lily would die if she stayed. So Ilas had gritted her teeth, and left with her little sister, breathing for her, helping her stay alive, while the shape-shifter's heart had been torn in two, half remaining on the planet.

When Lily was finally hooked up to the life support machines in Medbay, Ilas had returned to the rooms she and her partners had been given on the Excalibur. Max had still been asleep, but Dureena had been waiting, pacing the room like a caged animal. Ilas had fallen into the little Zanderi's arms and wept. She had screamed her anguish at what had been done to her son, cried out her guilt at not realizing that something was wrong with him, and sobbed for her sense of loss at having been forced to leave him on the planet below.

Dureena had held her, rocked her, and silently comforted her. Then, when Ilas had finally calmed, the thief had announced with complete composure and implacable determination that she was going to Medbay, and that she would wait there until Galen regained consciousness, or Alwyn returned, whichever came first. Then she would insist that the Technomages restore their son. No excuses would be accepted, no procrastination allowed. The Zanderi's eyes had glittered with fury as she had flung herself from the room, leaving Ilas to look after their daughter. That had been nearly twenty-four hours before, and since then Ilas had waited, alone, for Dureena to return or for Max to wake.

A noise from the doorway to the bedroom made Ilas look up. Max stood there, scrubbing his face with his hands. He blinked several times and frowned, asking irritably, "Where are we? Is this the Excalibur? When did the ship get here and what are we doing up here? Ilas, can you tell me what the hell is going on?"

Ilas took a deep breath and shifted Ilori to one shoulder, holding out her hand and beckoning Max to join her on the sofa.

"This will take a little time, Max, so come and sit down. Now, tell me the last thing you remember."

As Max moved across the room toward her, Ilas wondered how she could tell him that it was his work that had led to them lose their son. [He's not lost! I won't let him be lost! I'll find a way to get him back, somehow.] Ilas repeated the words over and over in her head. [Somehow, I'll get him back. Somehow.]

Dureena sat by the side of the Technomage's bed, waiting. She had sat there for nearly a day, refusing all the Medbay team's attempts to move her, until they had given up and let her alone. Her stubbornness was not driven by concern for Galen, although her attitude toward him had softened after her daughter was born. Right now, she was totally focused on revenge. She wanted to destroy the monster that had taken her son's body, and this man might be able to help her. So she sat, rigid and unmoving, waiting for him to regain consciousness.

A change in the pattern of Galen's breathing made Dureena turn her head and watch the Technomage closely. His eyes flickered and opened, slowly focusing on Dureena's face, which now hung above him. He tried to speak, but his mouth was dry and no sound emerged.

Dureena waited, motionless, not speaking or helping, just waiting for him to find his voice. After he had licked his lips, Galen tried again. It was the barest whisper, but the thief's hearing was keen.

"I'm sorry."

The little Zanderi glowered as she said, "Don't be sorry. Fix it."

Galen nodded, his voice a dry whisper. "I'll save your son or die trying."

Dureena nodded abruptly. "Make sure you do. Because if you fail, I'll kill you." She turned abruptly and stalked out of Medbay.

Excalibur - late morning

Gideon looked around the table and considered the group gathered in the conference room. Alwyn looked tired, having spent the night battling with the spirit that possessed Vya's body, before finally succeeding in activating the controls in the room that had kept the spirit confined for millennia. Sarah sat next to him, stroking Ishtar, who rested lightly on the doctor's knee, leaning her head on Alwyn's arm, crooning softly. Gideon wondered where Ishtar's baby dragon was hiding, before deciding that he was probably better off not knowing. He made mental note to hide his new leather jacket anyway. Just in case.

His gaze moved over to John, who sat rigidly next to Sarah, his back straight, his face unmoving, his eyes twin pits of pain and loss. The XO had spent the night at Lily's side, and Gideon was sure he hadn't slept at all.

Next to John sat Angel, who had insisted on accompanying Ilas to the conference room. They had left Deborah to look after the children, including Sarah and Alwyn's son, Jaysen, who had been dropped off

with her just before the meeting. Gideon had agreed to Angel's demand, mainly because it gave him the excuse he'd been looking for to exclude his wife. He didn't want her having any part in the discussion of what was to happen next, or in whatever plan they came up with. The Captain knew he was being selfish, but he wanted to be sure that whatever happened, Deborah and Marcus were safe.

Deborah had at first argued that she could leave the children in the Medbay crèche, or with Dureena, who was caring for Ilori. She had soon been forced to admit that Lily's three would be better off with her, where she could project reassurance and comfort to them. Dasha, Faylinn and Naima had spent the previous night in Marcus' room, all four children bundled up into sleeping bags, while Deborah had sat with them, reading them stories, soothing them into sleep, comforting them when they had woken, crying for their mother.

Gideon had no idea how much sleep his wife had got, but he suspected it hadn't been much. He had slept alone in the bed he normally shared with her, restless with the pain from his shoulder, and lonely from Deborah's absence. His shoulder was still sore, and he wore a sling supporting his left arm.

Glancing at Ilas sitting next to him, the Captain wondered what the shape-shifter was thinking and feeling. No signs of emotion showed on her pale face, but Gideon was sure she was grieving for her son. He promised himself again that he would get Vya back for her. Somehow. Now it was time to find out how.

Gideon cleared his throat and looked across at Sarah. "As you're representing the Medbay team, Doctor, perhaps you could update us on the progress of your patients."

Sarah gave her report quietly. "GTan, Angel and Ilas are all fully recovered, although GTan will be scarred. Demon's jaw is healing nicely, and you, Captain, should still be in bed. I don't recall anyone in Medbay signing you off as fit for duty."

Gideon waved away her comment, muttering about technicalities, then leaned forward, careful not to knock his sore arm against the table, as whimpering in pain wouldn't fit the image he was trying to create. "Carry on with your report, doctor."

Sarah's lips thinned, but she went on, "Galen is significantly improved. The nanomites in his bloodstream have nearly healed his internal injuries, and the wounds on his back have closed up cleanly. He should be on his feet later today."

Gideon opened his mouth to speak, but Sarah interrupted him. "That completes the tally of those injured physically, Captain, but Max and Dureena both need help and psychological support. Dureena didn't move from Galen's bedside all yesterday and last night, and she seems intent on dragging him back to the planet, by main force if necessary, as soon as he can stand." Her eyes flicked across to Ilas and she smiled apologetically. Ilas' face didn't even flicker.

Sarah sighed softly and continued, "Max is confused and distraught. He's in Medbay now, being examined. He has no memory of the time that has passed since he found the Box, but he's blaming himself for what has happened to Vya. He's going to need help getting over this, and Vya will need help, too, when we release him."

The Captain could have cheered when he heard the certainty in Sarah's voice. It wasn't 'if we release Vya' but 'when we release him'. He nodded and turned to Alwyn, saying, "On the subject of releasing Vya, you're our expert, Alwyn. Do you have any ideas on how we can do that?"

Before Alwyn could answer, John interjected softly, "And how we can bring Lily back. Don't forget Lily." His voice was quiet, but everyone at the table could feel his passion and commitment.

Angel reached across and patted his arm gently, whispering reassuringly, "We'll never forget Lily, John. Just as we'll never forget you or Luke, either."

Gideon cleared his throat, regaining the attention of the group. "We won't forget anyone. I won't leave anyone behind." Everyone around the table nodded, knowing his reputation. He looked over at Alwyn again and gestured for the Technomage to speak.

"You've set me quite a challenge this time, Captain." Alwyn smiled sadly, the lines on his face showing his exhaustion. "This will make curing the Drakh plague seem easy by comparison." He sighed and reached out to rest his hand gently on Ishtar's head. The golden dragon warbled softly, turning her face into his hand, her whirling, magenta eyes closing in pleasure as she rubbed herself against his palm. Sarah dropped her hand to cover Alwyn's as he went on, "But I think we can do it. When Galen is recovered, we will go down to the planet and to the room where this thing is confined."

Alwyn looked apologetically at Ilas, silently asking forgiveness for his description of her son. Ilas' face remained frozen, and the Technomage continued, "We will take Lilith Morgaine with us. First, we will drain the stolen life force from the creature, channeling it into Lilith. This will weaken the creature, but it will not be easy. We will lose much of the energy during transfer, but if I understand correctly, the creature has stolen the life force from six previous victims. There should be more than enough to replenish Lily, restoring her usual health and vitality."

John dropped his head into his hands, whispering, "Thank you," but unable to look at Alwyn as he covered his tears of relief. Angel placed her arm around the telepath's shoulders and hugged him gently.

Alwyn went on, "There is, however, a difficulty. While we are draining the life force, we will have to release the creature from confinement. We must have a way of restraining it during the process, but its shape-shifting abilities make that difficult and dangerous."

Ilas spoke for the first time since she'd entered the room. "I can do that. I have the same abilities as my son, and I'm stronger, but I'll need Angel's help." For the first time her face showed some expression as she looked at her sister, her eyes pleading.

Angel looked back at Ilas, and Gideon could see the raven-haired witch was terrified of what she was being asked to do. He wondered whether he should intervene, ordering Angel to stay on the ship, but before he could do so, she said quietly, "Of course I'll help. The thought of going back down there scares me witless, but if I can use my telekinetic powers to hold Vya while you restore the life-force to Lily, then I'll be glad to do whatever I can."

Gideon had never been prouder of Angel, and he desperately wanted to show her how he felt, but he didn't dare. There was too much history and too much attraction between them for him ever to be too open about his feelings. He didn't want Angel going down to the planet and risking her life any more than he wanted Deborah doing the same, but there was nothing he could do to stop Angel without making his feelings for her clear. [Although everyone in this room probably already knows how I feel about her,] he thought ruefully.

Ilas flung her arms around her sister, hugging her tightly, and John looked up and smiled at the young

witch, his eyes showing the depth of his gratitude. He whispered, "Thank you," again, then took a deep breath and straightened in his chair, looking across at Gideon. "Permission to lead the team going down to the planet, Captain."

The Captain grimaced. He'd intended to lead the team himself, but he caught Sarah's warning glance, and knew it was hopeless. She'd never let him go in his current state, and he and John weren't allowed to leave the ship at the same time unless under direct orders from President Sheridan.

With a deep sigh, Gideon said, "Permission granted, Commander. But you can tell Luke that he has to stay home and baby-sit. If Sarah's agreeable, I'd prefer her to be the medic on this mission. Deborah and I will take care of Jaysen, if that's OK with you?"

Sarah nodded, and Gideon ignored a soft snort from Angel, accompanied by a muttered, "I wouldn't like to be the one to tell Demon she's got to stay home with the children." He wasn't exactly looking forward to that job himself, but he told himself it was preferable to having her on the mission.

Gideon sat back in his chair, and shifted his arm into a more comfortable position. He said, "OK, Alwyn, you have your team. John's in command, Angel and Ilas will be there to restrain Vya, Sarah will look after Lily, and you and Galen will do your stuff. Now tell us just how you plan to get that thing back into the Box, and Vya out of it."

Alwyn's smile was full of malicious satisfaction as he said, "Magic, my dear boy. Magic!"

23rd August 2272

Excalibur - early afternoon

Gideon watched in silence as John and Luke pushed the trolley bearing Lily's comatose form across the landing bay and onto the shuttle. She was still enclosed in the glass cocoon that kept her alive, so the trolley was heavy. Others had offered to help, but the two men had refused. They wanted to be as close to their lover as they could, for as long as they could.

It still disturbed Gideon to see Lily's apparently lifeless form. She had now been in her coma for three days, and he wondered if John and Luke had slept at all during that time. They had spent every hour they could with Lily, and when they took turns to leave her side, they had spent the remaining time with their children. The two men looked like zombies, but the Captain would never have dared suggest to John that he wasn't fit to lead the landing team. All Gideon could do was send down two of G'Tan's Marines as escorts, and hope that would be enough to keep them all safe.

G'Tan had wanted to accompany the team himself, but Sarah had insisted that his face wasn't sufficiently healed. She had been quite acerbic with the big Narn, telling him that he would have been fit for duty if he hadn't refused regenerator therapy.

As the two men disappeared inside the shuttle with the trolley, the doors to the landing bay opened, and Gideon turned to see Ilas and Dureena enter, the little Zanderi carrying Ilori hugged tightly to her shoulder. The Captain wondered if Dureena would ever put the child down again. One child of hers had been murdered, and another possessed. Dureena wanted to be sure that no harm could come to her daughter.

The Captain rubbed at his sore shoulder, pretending to watch the two Narn Marines entering the shuttle,

while actually listening to the quiet exchange between the shape-shifter and the thief.

"I want to come, too!" Dureena hissed softly.

Ilas' voice was low but implacable. "We've been over this. You have to look after Max and Ilori. Don't tell me again that I could stay and do that, while you go down to the planet. You know I have to go. Vya is my son, and only I can control him if necessary. With Angel's help."

The two women moved across the landing bay, their voices now inaudible to the Captain, but he had no doubt that the argument would continue until the moment of departure. He also had no doubt that Ilas would win. The shape-shifter always seemed the most flexible and willing to adapt of the partnership between her, Dureena and Max, but Ilas had a core of steel running through her. When she really wanted something, she usually prevailed.

The doors opened again, and Gideon watched Angel walk through them. She smiled at him and paused to ask, "How's your shoulder now, Matt? Still sore?"

Gideon nodded, rubbing at again at the painful joint. "Sarah tells me that it will take a while to heal fully. She won't let me back on duty until tomorrow, although I plan to sneak up the bridge as soon as you've gone, and monitor what's happening from there."

Angel laughed softly. "You're just trying to avoid Demon. She's not exactly happy about being left out, is she?"

Gideon shook his head, half-laughing, and then he couldn't stop himself reaching out and touching Angel's cheekbone, drawing his thumb down her face in a gentle caress. She looked so beautiful, so vulnerable, so incredibly sexy in her black leather pants, red T-shirt and black, short leather jacket. He pushed that last thought aside, and smiled to himself, thinking that she would need to fasten her jacket when she got out of the shuttle. It would still be dark at the site, and cold in the night before dawn.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Angel? You don't have to, you know. I can send..." Gideon's words were interrupted when Angel reached up and laid her fingers on his lips.

"Shh. I'm going. I'm glad you care enough to worry, Matt, but this is my chance to make amends. Can't you see that?"

Gideon frowned, shaking his head while he took her hand and gently kissed her fingers. He knew he shouldn't let himself do this, but he was worried that Angel might be hurt, or worse. She smiled at his gesture and went on, "I caused the death of Dureena's first child..." Gideon tried to interrupt but she quieted him again, saying, "Let me finish. I know I was tricked into it, but it happened, and I can't change that. But at least if I help save Vya, I'll have done something to balance that act. Do you understand? I need to do this. For Dureena, for Ilas, for Max, for Vya, but most of all, for me."

Gideon shook his head, asking, "How many times do you think you need to do something to balance the score? You helped deliver Ilori when Alwyn collapsed."

"That was Dureena, this is for Ilas." Angel smiled sadly.

"And what about for Max?"

Angel wrinkled her nose, "I'll let Dureena and Ilas handle that."

Gideon laughed softly and kissed her hand again, saying quietly, "I understand, but I don't have to like it. Be careful."

Angel's smile turned mischievous as she fluttered her eyelashes at him, saying, "I'm not the careful type, Captain. You know me, impetuous all the way through."

Gideon laughed. "Well just for once, curb it. No hot-headed, rash behavior today, please." He dropped her hand as the doors opened again, this time admitting Sarah and Alwyn, who walked either side of a pale looking Galen.

The Captain had visited the younger Technomage in Medbay several times over the previous two days, noting his improved color and energy levels at every visit. He was nevertheless concerned that Galen hadn't allowed himself sufficient recovery time before attempting what he and Alwyn had planned. [Whatever the hell it is they have planned!] Gideon was still irritated that the Technomages wouldn't tell him what they were going to do. Alwyn's, "Magic, my dear boy!" was the best explanation he'd got. [If I didn't know better, I'd think that they're winging it, and they don't want to admit it.]

The sight of Galen leaning heavily on his staff, and the look on Sarah's face as she watched him, did nothing to allay Gideon's fears. Half-aware that Angel had quickly left his side and sped into the shuttle, the Captain said, "Are you sure you're up to this, Galen? It's barely three days since..."

Galen waved him into silence. "I am sufficiently healed to assist Alwyn in this endeavor. He will carry the burden of our activity, I will merely provide support."

Gideon nodded, but had to ask a question that had been bothering him since the previous day. "I don't understand how you and Alwyn alone are going to pull off what you thought it would take all four sisters and you to achieve. What's different this time? You said you'd need a full convocation of Technomages to put that thing back in the Box."

Alwyn stepped forward, waving at Sarah, indicating that she should help Galen into the shuttle.

"I can answer that, Captain. The creature is now confined, which will make it much easier to effect the life-force transfer to Lilith. Once that transfer is complete, the creature's energy levels will be seriously depleted. In that weakened state, evicting its spirit from Vya's body becomes much easier."

*The older Technomage's lip twitched at the corner as he said, "You should also take my presence into account. I am *much* more powerful than you have ever given me credit for."*

For a moment, Alwyn's eyes seemed to glow, and his appearance shifted. While the older man had long since abandoned his disguise as the elderly, almost doddering Technomage Gideon had first met, the appearance the Captain now glimpsed was of an entirely different man again. This man was taller, leaner, and darker in face and persona. This was someone shadowy and dangerous.

The image was gone in a second, but it left Gideon shaken. Who exactly was this Technomage who acted as surrogate father to Deborah, and who bounced Marcus on his knee whenever he came to visit?

A soft chirrup from inside Alwyn's coat attracted the Captain's attention, and he looked to see Ishtar's nose peeking out, quickly followed by the rest of her body. The golden dragon clawed her way up to

Alwyn's shoulder, then sat there, her tail wound around the Technomage's neck, her magenta eyes whirling in what Gideon could have sworn was amusement.

The Captain decided he had no desire to get his ear singed again, so he smiled in what he hoped was a harmless fashion, at all four eyes glaring at him. "You take all the credit you want, Alwyn. No one on this ship is going to stop you. Just remember to keep a channel open to the ship all the time you're down there."

Alwyn smiled back and nodded, while Gideon wondered how such a charming smile could appear quite so shark-like. Then he became aware the Dureena and Luke were emerging from the shuttle. The pilot boarded quickly and waited at the top of the ramp for his last passenger to join them. The Captain gestured for Alwyn to join the others, wished him luck, and then walked out of the landing bay with the doctor and the thief beside him.

Cygnus 36 - pre-dawn

John gently lowered the stretcher on which Lily lay, making sure that he kept it completely level, despite the muscles in his arms shaking from the exertion. Getting Lily and all her life support equipment down to the room where Vya was confined had been strenuous, and John had already been exhausted before they started down. Nevertheless, he had insisted that he would carry one end of the stretcher, while Ilas had shifted into Narn form, and carried the other end.

The Commander was fairly sure that Angel had surreptitiously used her telekinetic abilities to help them over some of the more difficult obstacles on the journey, but the raven haired witch had never said anything, even when he had given her a look that coming from anyone else except John Matheson would have best been described as a glare. But John was far too polite to glare, so she had just ignored it, and provided additional lift when it was most needed.

The two Narn Marines had both offered to relieve John of his burden, but he had refused every offer of help. Didn't they know that Lily could never be a burden to him? Couldn't they see how important it was to him to perform this service at least, when he could do so little else for her?

Even so, John's arms shook with relief as he finally relinquished the load. Lily herself weighed little, but the equipment needed to keep her alive was heavy, and he was glad to set it down where Alwyn indicated, just to one side of the plinth in the center of the room. Sarah immediately stepped forward and leaned over Lily's unmoving body, checking to ensure she had suffered no harm. After a few seconds, the doctor turned to John as he knelt next to her.

Sarah said, "She's stable," and smiled.

Knowing this was the best he could hope for, John straightened, rubbing his back and his aching arms. He then cast a glance at the ball of fire hovering in mid-air over the plinth. Through the cage of red, wavering lines he could just discern the outline of a humanoid body, curled into fetal position. The body didn't move, and John turned at the sound of Ilas' gasp of pain. He watched as she rushed forward, whispering, "Vya!" in a voice full of anguish.

Alwyn held her back gently, saying, "He's not suffering. The restraints are painless for the body. Only the spirit is tormented by the restriction, and that spirit is not your son."

Ilas shifted back to her usual form, shaking off the Technomage's hands. She said quietly but remorselessly, "If that spirit is suffering, then I'm glad. It deserves pain for what it's done to my family."

John had never heard Ilas speak so vindictively before. He might have expected such a comment from Dureena, but Ilas wasn't usually so ruthless. Her words indicated how deeply she'd been hurt by what had been done to Vya, Lily and Max. John found himself in agreement with her. The spirit should suffer for its actions.

The Commander waved to the two Marines to take position in the corners of the room, weapons raised, then turned to Alwyn. "What do you want us to do now?" He asked, waiting for instructions.

Alwyn told Galen to stand on the opposite side of the plinth, while he positioned Angel and Ilas between them, so the four participants stood at the four points of the compass, with the plinth and the ball of fire at the center. Smiling down at the doctor, Alwyn said, "You can stay with Lilith for the moment, Sarah, but move back when I tell you."

He then turned to John, saying, "It would be best if you blocked the doorway, Commander. If there is any sign that the creature is going to escape, either in its current form, or having taken over one of our bodies, you must stop it. Your telepathic powers make you best suited for the detection of any transfer. Keep your mind open, your weapon ready, and be prepared to shoot. Just try to shoot something Sarah can fix, will you? She'll be most annoyed if you damage anything she values."

The Technomage winked, and John couldn't help but smile, grateful for Alwyn's attempt to lighten the tense atmosphere. He moved to the doorway and removed his PPG from its holster, holding it ready to fire.

Angel shivered as she stepped forward, taking the position Alwyn had indicated. She had fastened her jacket against the cold when she'd first descended from the shuttle into the dark, but it was chilly and dank in the dim light of the room. The young witch couldn't help remembering what had happened the last time she'd been in this room, and her next shiver had nothing to do with the cold.

Alwyn had briefed Angel on what was needed of her, and she was frightened by the responsibility that rested on her shoulders. She had to hold the creature immobile while the two Technomages drained its life force and revived Lily. If it escaped her grip before they were ready for it...Angel shook that thought away and braced her shoulders. It wouldn't! She wouldn't let it.

Becoming aware that Alwyn, Galen and Ilas were all looking at her anxiously, Angel managed a smile and nodded. "Let's do it!" She closed her eyes and focused her power.

[It's just like my Ball of Sight. I can hold that in the air for hours. This is just a bit bigger and it wriggles. Goddess, it's wriggling! It's slipping, I won't let it slip, I won't let it...] Angel repeated the words over and over in her head, opening her eyes again to concentrate everything she had on keeping the creature in Vya's body motionless. She reminded herself that when the Excalibur had first come to Eriadne, she had held sixteen people immobile, including one very pissed off Captain. If she could do that then, she could do this now.

The cage of red lines faded, and Vya's form became clearer, emerging from the confining flames. Angel held the curled up body motionless, feeling as if she were trying to grasp a freshly caught fish. It slithered and slipped, wriggled and writhed in her mind, while the physical form stayed frozen in the air above the

plinth.

"Hurry!" Angel gasped the word, totally focused on her task.

Alwyn grasped his staff between his hands, raising it parallel to the ground, and Galen did the same on the other side of the room. Lines of red sprang from both ends of the two staves, creating a ruby rectangle around the plinth. The square of light became diffused, spreading inwards until it touched, then enveloped the form in the center, still curled into a fetal position, but now visibly struggling against Angel's mental hold.

"It's getting away from me!" Angel panted, feeling the creature winning its struggle, gradually escaping her grip.

A touch on her mind felt like an electric shock, and Angel jumped, but somehow kept her grasp on the writhing form. The touch was followed by a jolt of power, and the young witch re-established her hold with renewed strength. A soft but determined voice sounded in her mind.

[[Use my strength, Angel. Take whatever you need.]] Ilas' words were like a cool drink on a hot day, refreshing and empowering Angel, giving her the energy she needed to retain her hold. Ilas' mental touch was strengthened by her implacable hatred of the spirit that possessed her son's body, full of anger and anguish, but most of all full of love for her family.

Angel pulled on that source of energy, firming her mental hold, and saying softly, "Got him! Thanks, Ilas." She had no idea how Ilas had made contact with her, as their link had been severed when Ilas had left the Excalibur years before, but somehow the shape-shifter's desperation and determination had overcome that obstacle.

Alwyn's voice called out, "Now, Sarah! Move back," as a crimson beam shot out from the center of the red globe of light, connecting with Lily's forehead as she lay on the floor nearby.

Angel tried not to let her attention waver as her sister's body convulsed, but John's cry of alarm from the doorway distracted her. Her grip on the creature faltered, and it started to writhe its way free.

"Hold!" The words sounded in her ears and her mind, and a wave of cool, blue, refreshing energy surged into Angel's mind from her sister. She drew in a deep draft and re-established her hold, just before the creature escaped from the bottom of the scarlet sphere of radiance. Heaving a sigh of relief, Angel firmed her mental grip. There was no way this little wriggler was getting away from her now!

She glared at Vya's form, while from the corner of her eye, she could see that Sarah had bent over Lily's body, close, but not touching, as the beam of light seemed to penetrate the little red-head's brow. Lily convulsed again, and the lines between her and the machines keeping her alive became detached. A sudden alarm sounded, and Angel had to focus all her energy and attention on her task. It would have been so easy to be distracted by what was happening to Lily, but Angel knew that if she allowed her grip to falter for even a second, her sister's life, and possibly that of everyone in the room, could be lost.

[[Hold on, Angel, you can do it!]] Ilas' reassuring tones echoed in Angel's head, as another surge of energy flooded her mind.

Sarah Chambers bent over Lily's convulsing body and frowned with anxiety. The seizures had worked

loose the connections to the life support machines, and the alarm that had sounded a few moments before told her Lily's heart had stopped beating. If Sarah didn't get the red-head reconnected within the next couple of minutes, her patient could suffer irreversible brain damage. But touching Lily while the energy beam connected her to Vya could easily kill them both.

Sitting back on her heels, Sarah glanced anxiously up at her partner, wondering how much longer this process would take. Alwyn's eyes were closed and it was obvious he was totally focused on the spell he and Galen had woven around Vya's struggling form. The doctor would get no help or advice from that direction.

Glancing down, she was relieved to see that Lily was gradually calming. Each spasm was less violent than the last, but the alarm indicating a lack of a heartbeat was still sounding. Lily was still not breathing independently.

Unable to wait any longer, Sarah called out, "Alwyn, I have to help her!" She lunged forward, bracing herself for the shock she would suffer when she made contact. At that moment, the red beam snapped out of existence, and Sarah heard a thump from the far side of the plinth, closely followed by another nearby. She refused to allow herself to be distracted, and went to work on Lily, massaging her chest and breathing into her mouth.

After a few seconds, Lily gave a great gasp, and took her first unassisted breath for three days. Sarah wanted to cheer. She glanced up to smile at Alwyn, then saw there were other people needing her help.

Angel was standing rigidly, hands tightly clenched at her sides, frowning with concentration as she held Vya's form curled in a ball, still hovering over the plinth. There was no glow surrounding Vya now, and Sarah realized Angel was holding the creature in place unaided.

Ilas was slumped on the ground, having given everything she had in supporting Angel's efforts. The little shape-shifter had exhausted herself.

Alwyn leaned heavily on his staff, and smiled down at Sarah, saying softly, "Make sure Lily's safe, then go to Galen. The poor boy has collapsed again. It's all been a bit too much for him."

Sarah smiled lovingly back at the older Mage, promising herself that later she would find a special way to thank him for his efforts in helping their friends. She had no idea why Alwyn was willing to risk so much for these people, but she was eternally grateful for what he had done and was willing to do.

The sound of footsteps flying across the room made it obvious that John's self-control had finally broken. He dropped to his knees by Sarah's side, leaning forward and whispering, "Lily? Come back to us, Lily, please."

Sarah watched as he closed his eyes, tears sliding down his face as he touched Lily's forehead. Lily gave another gasp, and a second later her eyes opened. Her gaze slowly focused on the man leaning over her, and then her lips parted, silently forming the words, "Sweet-face."

John sobbed and reached out, hugging his partner to his chest, kissing her over and over again as he wept. Sarah smiled and quickly got to her feet, moving around to where Galen had fallen, hoping that he, too, would recover.

Angel refused to allow herself to be distracted. She was aware that Lily had revived, that John had gone to her, and that Ilas and Galen had both collapsed, but she let none of that divert her attention. She had only one goal. [Hold!]

The creature's struggles had diminished as the life force had been drained from it, but it still strove to break free. Angel couldn't allow her concentration to falter for a moment, as she knew that if it escaped now, it could still kill them all. Ilas was unconscious on the floor, having given too much of herself, and she would not be able to shape-shift and fight her son. It was all down to Angel, and she didn't know how much longer she could hold on.

"Alwyn, help me!" She whispered, desperately. She knew the older Technomage was already exhausted, but he was the only one who could help her now. If he could perform the next part of the spell, then the creature would be banished back to the Box and Angel could let go. Her mind was cramping with effort, shafts of pain lancing through her temples, and the last vestiges of energy were deserting her. Then she felt another source of power coming to her assistance.

[[Hold, Angel, hold!]] John's voice was deep and gentle in her mind. He had seen her efforts, had seen how near to exhaustion she was, and he was now giving her what little energy he had left. It wasn't much, but it was filled with his anger at what had been done to Lily, and his love for the little redhead. It was enough.

Sending a wave of gratitude to the telepath, Angel gripped more firmly onto Vya, waiting for the Technomages to complete their spell.

Sarah quickly injected a stimulant into Galen's arm. Before they'd left the ship, Alwyn had told her it might be necessary, and he had advised her on which drug she could use safely. Its effect was immediate. Galen's eyes opened and he looked up at the doctor, smiling gently and saying, "How very stupid of me. I really should know better than to collapse in the middle of a ritual. I thought I'd put that bad habit behind me years ago and now Alwyn's going to rub it in for the next thousand years or so."

The doctor smiled back and helped the Technomage to his feet, very much aware of how weak he still was. In any other circumstance she would have told him to lie still and recover, but there was no time. Angel was pale and shaking from her efforts to control Vya's body. She needed help and she needed it now. The only people who could give her that help were the Technomages.

Galen leaned heavily on his staff for a moment, then straightened. He said quietly, "I'm all right now, Sarah. Thank you. Go help Ilas." He nodded to where the shape-shifter was lying unconscious on the floor, then looked across to Alwyn and said, "Will you get the Box? I must confess to being a little weary, and I'm not sure I could lift it."

As Sarah moved to tend to her last patient, she saw Alwyn go to a shadowed corner of the room, and emerge holding a large stone chest in front of him. It was obviously heavy, and Alwyn struggled to lift it up onto the plinth, positioning it directly under Vya's body, which still hung in space, held there by Angel's will. The Technomage then lifted the stone lid and carefully set it on the floor. A sickly yellow glow seeped from the top of the chest.

Sarah glanced at Angel and saw that beads of sweat now stood out on her forehead, and her face was completely white. Her lips moved silently, as she whispered the word, "Hold," over and over.

John still held Lily tightly, but his eyes were closed and he had lifted his head and turned his face toward Angel. The mental link between them was almost palpable, and Sarah only hoped that John could give Angel the mental strength she needed.

Kneeling next to Ilas, the doctor felt for a pulse and was relieved to find it. Ilas was unconscious, but breathing freely. She had exhausted herself helping Angel, but she would recover. There was now nothing Sarah could do but sit back and watch, while the Technomages moved onto the second part of their spell.

Alwyn and Galen again lifted their staffs, but this time the red bolts of light emerged from both ends and crossed in the middle of the room, immediately above the open chest, and below Vya. The sickly yellow glow gradually increased in strength, as it appeared to feed on the beams emerging from the Technomages' staves. The yellow radiance slowly focused into a tight shaft of light, growing stronger as it fed.

Alwyn called out, "Angel, you need to move him. Let him uncurl, then keep him steady above the light."

Angel swallowed visibly, and Sarah could see tears of effort leaking from the young witch's eyes. How much more could she do? How much longer would her strength last?

All too slowly, Vya's body uncurled, and Angel forced his limbs apart, until he lay, spread-eagled face down in mid-air, above the Box. The shaft of yellow light tightened further, hitting the child in the middle of his chest, suddenly piercing his body, and emerging from the center of his back. Vya let out a howl of pain, and struggled against his invisible restraints.

It was too much for Angel, and with a groan of despair, she collapsed, losing her hold on the young shape-shifter's body. Vya dropped from his position, and fell directly onto the Box. The beam of light piercing his chest blasted his body back into the air, then curled around him, slowly drawing him back down.

Sarah watched as Vya struggled violently, but the yellow beam held him fast. When his body dropped far enough to touch the point where the red beams emitted by the Technomages' staffs crossed, there was a violent explosion of sound and light, and Vya's body was thrown across the room. The yellow light disappeared, and the Technomages' red beams vanished, just as Alwyn and Galen both collapsed.

The doctor didn't know which way to turn. Too many people needed her help. Angel, Galen and Alwyn were all unconscious, Vya was probably badly injured and John was preoccupied with Lily. Every instinct drove Sarah to Alwyn's side, but she knew he was probably the least harmed, being the strongest.

At that moment, Ilas sat up abruptly and crawled rapidly to her son's side, solving one part of Sarah's dilemma. The two Narn Marines helped solve the rest by volunteering their help, and Sarah directed them to assist Galen and Angel. That left her free to do what she most wanted.

Sitting on the floor next to Alwyn, she gently pulled his head onto her knee. His pulse was strong, and his bright blue eyes fluttered open at her touch. Sarah looked down into them and smiled. "Crazy old man. Did it work?"

Alwyn smiled back up at her. "How could you doubt me? Of course it worked." His voice was rough with exhaustion, but Sarah could see that he was essentially unharmed, just very, very tired. He went on, "Now go and check on your other patients, my love. Ishtar will take care of me."

The little golden dragon emerged from inside Alwyn's cloak and gave Sarah a cheerful chirp. Sarah laughed. If Ishtar was cheerful, then Alwyn must be all right. She bent forward and kissed her lover's forehead, then moved abruptly, dropping his head to the floor, causing him to let out a bellow of protest.

"If Ishtar can take care of you, she can be a pillow for you, too!" She grinned mischievously, and went to check on Vya, laughing at Alwyn's grumbling about sadistic doctors.

Ilas lay on her side, cradling her son in her arms. He had assumed his natural form, with golden skin and dark lavender hair, just like his mother. Unlike Ilas, his eyes remained bright blue, the one genetic trait he had inherited from his father. Those eyes fluttered open, just as a voice sounded in Ilas' head.

[[Mommy? What happened? Have I been asleep? Why do I hurt?]]

Ilas hugged her son tightly, sending waves of reassurance through their mental link. [[It's all right, Vya, everything's all right now. Go back to sleep and when you wake, you won't hurt any more.]]

The love Vya sent back gave Ilas all the reassurance she needed. Her son was restored to his body, and the evil spirit that had possessed him was driven out.

The shape-shifter lay quietly, curled around her son's sleeping body, listening to the hubbub around her as Sarah Chambers moved from one person to another, checking that each was recovering, before finally moving to Ilas' side.

The doctor kneeled down, and reached out to feel for Vya's pulse. Ilas intercepted her hand and smiled. "It's OK, he's fine now. I don't think he remembers much, but he's asleep. Let him stay that way for a while."

Sarah smiled back reassuringly, as she ran a scanner over Vya's body. "He's got a bad burn on his chest that we can easily fix while he sleeps, otherwise, he's fine. I'll get one of the Marines to help you carry him. That way he can sleep all the way back up to the ship."

Ilas slowly uncurled herself, sitting upright and lifting Vya. "Thanks, Sarah. That won't be necessary. I'll carry him."

The little shape-shifter stood, holding her son in her arms, silently vowing that nothing and nobody would ever take him from her again.

Excalibur - late at night

Angel's eyes flickered open, and she heard a soft chuckle from her right. "I wondered if you were going to sleep right through the night. From what I've heard about your exertions, you deserve a good sleep."

Angel turned to see her older sister sitting by the side of her bed. Looking around, the young witch realized that she was in Medbay, although she had no memory of getting back to the ship. The last thing she remembered...

Sitting bolt upright in bed, Angel asked, "Did it work? Did we do it?"

Demon stood and gently pressed her sister back down into the pillows, hushing her and telling her to rest. "Yes, it worked. Vya is safe and sound, back in his quarters with his parents and sister. Apart from a nasty burn on his chest, he wasn't hurt. Sarah fixed the burn and sent him home." The tall blonde took her sister's hand and squeezed it, smiling reassuringly. "Don't try to send to me yet. You strained yourself mentally holding onto Vya. You did it, Angel. I have no idea how you held on so long, but you did it."

Demon fussed around, rearranging Angel's pillows and bedcovers, until the younger woman got annoyed and said, "Stop being a mother hen! I'm fine. I have a headache that feels like the only cure might be decapitation, but otherwise, I'm fine!"

The tall blonde chuckled softly again, and reached out to the bedside table, passing Angel a glass and two pills. "Why didn't you say? Sarah left these for you, just in case your head hurt."

Angel took the pills and sipped at the water, feeling the pain dissipate almost immediately. With a sigh of profound relief, she lay back on her pillows, closing her eyes and enjoying the absence of pain for a few moments. Demon was blessedly silent, until finally Angel opened her eyes and asked quietly, "Is Lily..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the question.

Demon's usually expressionless face lit up into one of the rare smiles that made her beautiful. "Lily is much better. They brought her in here with you, checked her over, then she insisted that John and Luke took her home. She said she just needs to sleep in the arms of her boys and she'll be fine. You should have seen John and Luke's faces. They were both exhausted, poor darlings, but they were ready to fight their way through every Marine on the ship to carry out their Lilith's wishes."

Angel couldn't help but laugh at Demon's description, then she groaned as a shaft of pain shot through her temple. Her older sister looked instantly concerned, and stood to lay a cool, damp cloth on Angel's forehead. The relief was instant, and the raven-haired witch leaned back against her pillow again, smiling gratefully at her older sister.

"Thanks. Is everyone else OK? I remember Galen collapsed."

Demon nodded. "He was brought back to the ship on a stretcher again. Sarah says he's not to move out of Medbay for another day or so, but he'll be OK. Everyone's going to be fine, with the possible exception of one pig-headed Captain, who I'm not talking to right now, because if I did, I'd probably regret the things I'd say to him!"

Angel was surprised to see how aggressive Demon looked. Her firm jaw was set and her usually warm brown eyes flashed with anger.

"What has Matt done to make you so angry?"

Demon glared back at her younger sister. "He locked me in! The bastard reprogrammed the voice locks on our quarters and he locked me in, so I couldn't go down to the planet with you!"

Angel looked at her sister, trying to control herself, but she couldn't. After a few seconds of silent struggle, she howled with laughter.

"I'm glad someone around here is amused." Gideon leaned against the doorway, arms folded across his chest, looking at his wife and her sister. Angel was lying back in the bed, her raven hair falling around

her face as she laughed herself into hiccups. Deborah stood by the side of the bed, her golden blonde hair tied back into a rough ponytail, frowning with annoyance, and trying to quiet her younger sister.

The tall blonde stiffened as she heard the voice from the doorway, but she didn't turn. Her voice was low and controlled as she said to Angel, "If you can laugh like that you're obviously well on the road to recovery, so I'll leave you now. You can tell the Captain that I'll collect his son from the crèche and take him home."

With that, she turned on her heel and swept past Gideon, her chin held high, refusing even to acknowledge his presence. He watched her leave, unable even then to ignore the enticing sway of her hips inside the tight black jeans she wore. To him, Deborah had the sexiest butt in the universe, and if she carried on the way she had been, that butt was heading for a spanking in the not too distant future.

After he'd delivered a groveling apology, of course.

Turning to Angel, Gideon saw that she was still smiling, if a little sheepishly. "Oops! Looks like we're both in the doghouse, Matt. I have to admit that this time I don't blame her. Did you really lock her in?"

Gideon gave her his best ingratiating puppy dog smile. "Yes, I locked her in, but it was for her own good, and I'll explain that to her if she's ever willing to listen to me again. And did you notice? Whenever I've done something to annoy her, or if Marcus is being a pain, he suddenly becomes *my* son. Not ours, just mine."

Angel giggled. "I noticed. Good luck, Captain! You're going to need it!"

Gideon smiled and moved to take the seat next to Angel's bed, taking her hand and squeezing it gently as he did so. "Angel, it was bad enough having to let *you* go down there, knowing that you might be hurt. I couldn't stand the thought of possibly losing both of you." It was the closest he'd come to an open avowal of his feelings for Angel and a lot closer than he should have allowed himself to get.

Clearing his throat quickly, the Captain went on, "How are you feeling now? Sarah tells me you overdid it down there, and you've strained whatever part of your brain holds your telekinetic abilities. You have to rest and sleep for a few days, but then you should be fine."

Angel smiled in relief and Gideon had to stop himself from reaching up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She said, "That's a relief. I thought I might have broken something permanently. At the moment, I couldn't lift a feather with my mind, and even trying to send to my sisters hurts."

Gideon smiled and squeezed her hand again. "Then don't do either. Just stay here and sleep. You're off duty until either Sarah or Luke says you're fit. You can leave here in the morning, then you go back to your quarters and rest. Understand?"

Angel gave him a saucy smile and a sketchy salute as she said, "Yes, Sir!"

The Captain rose to his feet and was turning to leave the room when Angel called after him. "Matt?"

He turned and looked quizzically at the beautiful young witch. She still looked pale, but much better than when she'd been carried off the shuttle, unconscious. Gideon pushed that memory out of his mind. He never again wanted to think about the few moments before Sarah had told him Angel was essentially unharmed.

"Whatever Demon says or does, she loves you. All you have to do is say 'sorry' and mean it, and she'll forgive you. God knows I know that from experience. I've done lots worse than locking her in her room, but she's always forgiven me." Angel gave him one of her most mischievous smiles, and Gideon's heart turned over. She continued, "Just say you're sorry and really mean it. Oh, and a little abject groveling wouldn't do any harm."

Gideon laughed. "I'll remember that. Wish me luck with the pleading, Angel. I have a feeling I'm going to spend most of the next few days on my knees."

Angel laughed back, then turned onto her side, pulling the bed covers up around her neck. Within seconds she was asleep. Gideon smiled and quietly ordered the lights lower, then turned and left before he could succumb to the urge to climb into the bed next to her.

The lights in the Captain's quarters were turned down low when he walked through the door, and his wife was nowhere in sight. Moving through to his son's room, Gideon found that Marcus was sprawled across the bed, with his head dangling off the side, deeply asleep. The bedcovers were thrown off into a heap on the floor. Chuckling to himself as he thought how Marcus took after Deborah in the way he slept, the Captain gently lifted the little boy back onto his pillows, and pulled the covers up over him. He kissed his son on the forehead, whispered a good night, then took a deep breath and prepared himself to beard the lion in her den.

[[Lioness, anyway.]] Gideon smiled to himself as he thought of the many ways in which his wife resembled a large cat. [[And not just the golden eyes and sharp claws.]]

The bedroom he and Deborah shared was in darkness, and Gideon could just see a hump of bedcovers in the corner of the bed, where he guessed his wife was asleep. The soft sound of breathing, so deep it was nearly a snore, confirmed his suspicion. He moved quietly through to the bathroom, undressed quickly, then moved back to the bedroom and slid into bed.

Deborah rolled over in her sleep and snuggled up next to Gideon, draping one arm across his chest and twining one of her legs around his. He laid completely still, half surprised at her movement, before he realized that she was still asleep and her actions had been unconscious and automatic. Slowly moving his arm until it rested around Deborah's shoulders, he hugged her gently then kissed her forehead, whispering, "Good night," before closing his eyes.

Within seconds he became aware that the pattern of his wife's breathing had changed and she had stiffened at his side. She was awake, and she wasn't exactly happy about the position she found herself in, but she didn't pull away, at least.

After a few seconds, Gideon said quietly, "Will you let me explain? If I say I'm really, really sorry, and mean it, will you at least listen?"

Deborah let out a deep sigh and relaxed a little, saying softly, "I'll always listen, Matthew. I want to know why you didn't trust me."

*Gideon sighed, wondering how he was going to convince her. He said quietly, "The problem is that I *do* trust you. I trust you to be recklessly brave. I trust you to want to do anything to protect your sisters. I trust you to do everything I love about you, even though sometimes it drives me to do things I shouldn't. I*

was frightened I might lose you, and I couldn't bear that." He put everything he had into expressing his complete sincerity in what he said.

Deborah lay silently for a while, then she also sighed. "You are so lucky that I'm an empath. You do know that, don't you?"

The Captain chuckled and kissed the top of her head again. "Yes, I know that, but why am I particularly lucky right now?"

"Because I know you mean what you just said, and I know just how much you love me, so I think I'm going to have to forgive you."

Gideon blew out a deep breath, feeling a wave of relief rush through him. Before he could speak, Deborah went on, "Before you get too complacent, there are some conditions, Matthew."

The Captain lay quietly, still holding his wife in his arms as he asked, "What conditions?" He wondered exactly what she was going to ask, and could only hope it was something he could agree to.

Deborah paused for a long time, then said quietly, "You asked me to make you a promise, Matthew. I agreed, but now I want the same promise back from you." Her voice dropped half an octave and became commanding. "Next time you get frightened, talk to me first."

Gideon started to laugh. She had imitated his exact words and intonation. He reached out to turn on the bedside light, then looked back to see that Deborah was grinning up at him. He grabbed her and rolled her onto her back, then pushed her hair off her face, dropping his mouth to cover hers in a lingering kiss. She responded immediately, and enthusiastically.

When Gideon finally broke away for breath, he smiled down at his wife, seeing the passion in her golden brown eyes. He said quietly, "I promise. We really will have to learn to talk more."

Deborah grinned lasciviously. "But not right now. Why don't you shut up, Captain? I think you can find a much better use for your mouth, don't you?"

Gideon laughed, then followed her instructions and proved her right.

24th August 2272

Excalibur - morning

Gideon looked across the conference table at Max Eilerson and frowned. The xeno-archeologist looked pale and tired, but the sneer Gideon knew so well of old was back on Max's face. Eilerson looked around the table at the others sitting there and appeared to add up the total of the assembled party's IQ's and find them wanting. The Captain was sure something like that could be the only explanation for the smug, superior expression that flitted across Eilerson's face. He just wasn't sure if he preferred the old Max to the one under the influence of the Box. Maybe he could ask Alwyn...

Shaking that thought aside as uncharitable if all too enjoyable, Gideon turned to look at the older Technomage, who had entered the conference room with Sarah Chamber's arm tucked through his, and Ishtar preening loudly on his shoulder.

While small, golden dragons might not be that common a sight in the galaxy at large, the crew of the Excalibur was becoming used to this one. Fortunately, the Captain was the only person who had so far irritated Ishtar enough to merit a flaming. None of the rest of the crew had yet drawn her fiery wrath upon themselves. Gideon wondered how long their good fortune would last, and exactly how he might explain the resulting pile of ash to President Sheridan.

[Well, you see, Mr. President, Crewman Bloggs got between the Technomage's pet dragon and her peanut butter...]

Gideon shook that thought aside, too, and wondered if he should ask Alwyn to leave Ishtar on his ship when he and Sarah came to visit. He dismissed the idea immediately. All the women and children of his family would never forgive him, and that was a far worse prospect than explaining a cremated crewman to the President.

The Captain's eyes moved to the other Technomage who was now easing himself carefully into one of the chairs. Galen looked pale and tired, too, and he moved as if he thought every bone in his body might shatter at any second. There was no doubt that the last few days had taken a lot out of the Technomage.

John Matheson came through the doors from the bridge, sitting quickly and placing a datapad face down on the table, completing the group Gideon had called together for this meeting. The Captain cleared his throat and called the meeting to order.

"Alwyn. Could you give us an update on the Box?"

The older Technomage nodded politely, while encouraging Ishtar to move from his shoulder to his forearm. Watching how the small dragon's claws sunk into Alwyn's cloak, Gideon could see why the Technomages preferred thick leather for their clothing.

"The Box is under control, and its occupant safely confined. It cannot, however, remain where it is. Even if we close up the room where it was found, in the future some other archeologists with an excess of curiosity and greed, and insufficient caution, may foolishly poke their noses where they don't belong." Alwyn glared at Max and received a blistering glare back again, as the archeologist started to splutter in protest.

Gideon waved Eilerson into silence, half surprised when it actually worked, then nodded for Alwyn to continue.

"When Galen is fully recovered, we will return to the planet, put the appropriate bindings in place and move the Box to my ship. I will then transport it to a location where it will present no further threat to the life forms of this galaxy."

The Captain longed to ask how Alwyn planned to ensure that, but he knew exactly what the Technomage would say. "Magic, my dear boy. Magic."

Turning to Galen, Gideon asked, "How are you doing? You've taken one hell of a beating over the last few days. Are you going to be strong enough to help Alwyn with this anytime soon?"

Galen nodded. "The nanomites in my bloodstream are rapidly healing of my wounds, and sleep will complete the recovery process. I have, however, agreed with Alwyn that I will only attempt to carry out the binding process when Dr. Chambers agrees I am fit."

Gideon turned to Sarah, wondering just how much Alwyn had taught her about Technomage medicine during their time together. Probably a lot. He doubted there was anyone better qualified to pronounce on Galen's fitness, so he let that one go, and asked his next question.

"OK. Sarah, can you bring me up to date on the state of health of the other people injured in this debacle?" Gideon couldn't resist another quick glare at Max as he spoke. He wanted the xeno-archeologist left in no doubt as to whom he held responsible for all those injuries.

Sarah spoke quietly but firmly, reminding Gideon of how she used to participate in the many debates, discussions and arguments that had taken place in the conference room during their search for a cure to the Drakh plague.

"As Galen said, he's recovering well. Another day should see him fit to help Alwyn, then we can leave."

Gideon exhaled softly in relief. He really needed to get his ship moving again soon. They'd already stayed at Cygnus 36 longer than his schedule allowed, and even leaving early tomorrow, they'd have to travel at maximum burn to get to their next mission on time.

Sarah went on, "Vya doesn't seem to have suffered any long term effects from his ordeal."

Before she could continue, Max interrupted. "Vya remembers very little about what happened to him. He says he fell asleep in the tent, then woke up in his mother's arms, with a bad pain in his chest." He smiled fondly at the doctor as he said, "He thinks his Aunt Sarah is a nice lady for making the pain go away. I asked him whether he had any dreams while he was asleep and he says he doesn't remember. Which is probably for the best."

For just a moment, Gideon was convinced that Max's face showed an expression of guilt for what had happened to his son, but it was gone in an instant, replaced by Eilerson's usual superior sneer.

Nodding his agreement with the xeno-archeologist's last words, Gideon indicated that Sarah Chambers should continue.

"Lily is recovering well. Like Vya, she remembers very little after the bolt of pain that knocked all of the sisters to their knees when Vya attacked..."

Max interrupted again. "Let's be precise about this, Doctor. Vya didn't attack anyone. It may have been his body that was used, but it was the creature from the Box who actually attacked Galen and the sisters. My son would never have done that."

Max sounded as if this was something truly important to him, something he took seriously and cared about. Sarah nodded an apology and continued.

"The life-force Alwyn and Galen drained from the creature was sufficient to replace what had been stolen from Lily, and it brought her back to consciousness. She's still a little weak, but she has her own personal physician in attendance..." Sarah grinned as she broke off and looked across at John. "In very close attendance." John grinned back.

Gideon was prepared to give good odds that John and Luke had arranged their shifts so that one or the other of them was with Lily at all times for the foreseeable future. The Captain suppressed a smile as he

wondered how long the fiery little redhead would tolerate such close supervision. He decided he'd be prepared to bet that it took less than forty-eight hours before Lily chased both her men out of their quarters.

Sarah went on, "Angel has recovered from her mental exertions, although it will be a while before she can use her telekinetic powers or send to her sisters. She needs peace and quiet, and I've advised Luke that she won't be fit for duty for at least a week." The doctor glared over at Gideon as she said, "And that includes baby-sitting, Matt, so don't get any ideas."

The Captain put on his best expression of wounded innocence while privately wondering when Sarah had found time to take lessons in telepathy from John. Speaking of whom...

"John. Tell me how Jackson and Siddhartha have been doing running my ship."

Matheson grinned again and lifted the datapad from the table, turning it over to pass to his Captain face up, saying, "I brought the latest ship's status report with me."

Gideon scanned the data displayed there and let out a deep sigh. "Damn."

Sarah arched an eyebrow and asked, "Trouble, Matt?"

Gideon shook his head. "No trouble at all. That's the problem. They've run everything so well that they're bound to have figured out they don't need me at all. I think I just became redundant around here."

Sarah, John and Alwyn laughed, and even Galen perked up enough to assure him this was untrue. "Good heavens, Matthew, that can't possibly be right. They need you around to create the messes that everyone else feels so good about cleaning up."

That wasn't exactly the answer Gideon had been hoping for, but he decided it was the best he was going to get, and drew the meeting to a close. Sarah and Alwyn left, escorting Galen, warning him that he should go back to his ship and rest. John stood, saluted smartly, and left through the exit to the bridge. Max had just started to leave when Gideon called him back, making sure all the doors had closed before speaking.

"Max, there's one job I'm leaving for you to do when you get back down to the planet."

Eilerson raised an eyebrow in query and waited.

"You can explain to Brennan how you were personally responsible for the death of five of his people."

For a moment, it seemed as if the temperature in the room had dropped ten degrees and Gideon had to stop himself from checking the thermostat. Max glared back at him, hissing, "That's hardly fair, Captain. I wasn't *personally* responsible as you put it. The creature was."

"And who let that thing out, Max? Who couldn't wait to check what he'd found, couldn't wait to be sure? You had to grab that Box, didn't you? If it held any chance of wealth or fame, you just had to have it. Well, maybe next time you'll remember the price paid for your greed, by your son and by six other people. Maybe you'd like to write to Crewman Takeshiba's parents and tell them why they're never going to see their son again. I'm damned if I can think of a good reason for them. He didn't die making a noble sacrifice, defending his ship or his friends. He didn't even die in an accident. He was murdered by a thing

that only got loose because of your voracious appetite for wealth and notoriety, Max."

Max's eyes were flashing with anger, but Gideon drove on, too furious to care if he was being fair or not.

"You and that damned insatiability of yours. I'd hoped you'd gotten over it. That the money and power you gained during our mission had satisfied that avaricious streak. When you helped Deborah and me on Mars, I thought maybe you'd changed at last. But it's still there, isn't it, Max? That drive for power, that ambition. It still haunts you. Well, this time it came damned close to costing your son's life. I hope you've learned your lesson, because God help Dureena and Ilas if you haven't. But I don't hold out a lot of hope."

Gideon took a step toward the door, intending to leave. He'd had his say and was sick of the sight of Max Eilerson. If he never saw the xeno-archeologist again, that would be fine by him. The Captain blamed Max for everything. For the injuries sustained by so many people, including Gideon and his wife, but most of all for the deaths. Six people dead because of one man's greed and stupidity. Gideon didn't want to share the same oxygen as Max at that moment.

Before he could get to the door, Max moved to block him. The Captain could see that the linguist was angry, perhaps angrier than he'd ever seen Max before. The supercilious sneer had vanished, to be replaced by a glare of sheer fury.

"I know what my responsibilities are, Captain, and I don't need you to tell me about them. I'll deal with Brennan, and I'll even write to your crewman's parents, if you think that will help. But don't forget your own contribution to this mess. If you had told me what had happened with your Apocalypse Box, I wouldn't have been so fast to take that damned thing out of that room. You kept that little secret from me, and this is the result."

Gideon nearly hit him. Clenching his fists at his side, he fought to keep his voice level as he replied. "So the state of blissful ignorance isn't so blissful after all, is that it? You once told me that you enjoyed the position of not knowing everything. You enjoyed absolution in absentia." The Captain had never forgotten being subjected to one of Eilerson's little lectures, while they had waited for the results of the tests on Robert Black's people on Theta 49.

"Well, why don't you go absolve yourself, Max? Try an act of contrition and three Hail Mary's. Maybe that will help. But before you do that, you'd better think of a good explanation for Brennan."

Gideon pushed Max aside and stormed out of the conference room. He tried to block out Eilerson's words as he left, but couldn't help hearing the first few sentences.

"And what about your own absolution, Captain? Have you done your own act of contrition to Dureena? You probably think her wanting you to stand as her father when Ilori was born means that she doesn't remember how kept your Apocalypse Box secret for your own reasons, for your own advancement. Dureena, Ilas and our child paid the price for that secret. Just how different are we, Captain? Ask yourself..."

Gideon slammed onto a bullet car, the closing doors cutting off Max's final words. The Captain hoped that he would never have to see Eilerson again, in this lifetime or any lifetime to come.

Demon held Marcus on her knee and wondered how Matthew's meeting was going. She knew he intended to confront Max about the stupidity of his actions, but she could only hope that both men would keep

their tempers. Part of her longed to be in the conference room with her husband, using her empathic abilities to keep the emotional temperature cool, but Matthew had refused to let her go with him, saying that if Demon were there, her sisters would want to attend, too, and things could get even more out of hand.

The tall blonde had grudgingly accepted his argument, but she was still anxious. She knew that Matthew was much more angry than anyone realized. Over the previous few days he had used his sardonic humor to conceal that anger, but Demon had been in the next room when he'd dictated his letter to Crewman Takeshiba's parents, and she knew how much pain that death had caused her husband. He blamed himself for it, no matter how often Demon told him that there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. He had just replied, tersely, "I should have done something. Anything. These people are my responsibility." There was no way to argue with that.

The tall blonde sensed that much of her husband's anger was driven by his guilt about the consequences of his own possession of an Apocalypse Box. Matthew would never admit it, but on a subconscious level at least, Demon was sure he recognized the parallels between Max's behavior and his own. Both had kept their ownership of an A Box secret for the sake of the power it would bring them. Matthew's motives might have been less selfish than Max's, as he'd wanted the Box's help in finding out what was responsible for the loss of the Cerberus, but the results had been the same. Innocent people had suffered.

Demon had also been in bed with her husband the night when he had awoken suddenly, terrified by a dream in which Vya's fanged face hung over him, jaws ready to rip out his throat. What haunted Matthew most were the bright blue eyes staring down at him in that dream, as he prepared himself to die. The blue eyes Vya had inherited from his father, Max Eilerson.

Those same blue eyes were now fixed firmly on Demon and Marcus where they sat in a chair in Lily's quarters. Vya sat on the floor, between his mother's legs, leaning back against llas' chest as she sat with her arms around her son. The little boy had again shifted his appearance to match that of his mother. His face was white and his hair electric blue, his features cast in delicate, oriental form.

Angel sat next to Luke on the sofa, with Luke holding little Naima on his knee, while Angel held a sleeping Jaysen in her arms. Dureena held llori close to her chest, as she sat on the sofa next to Luke, while Dasha and Faylinn sat either side of Lily in another armchair, snuggled up to their mother. The twins had hardly left their mother's side since she had returned to them, seeming almost fearful that if they let her out of their sight, she might go away from them again. Lily looked a little tired, but otherwise seemed completely recovered from her trauma, and she held her children close to her sides, as if to reassure them.

The domesticity of the scene concealed a tension that was almost palpable to Demon's empathic senses. Each parent was holding their children close, afraid to let them out of their reach. Angel looked tired and was still unable to send to her sisters, but she seemed all too aware of the tension in the room. After some desultory talk about the health of the children and the healing of Vya's burned chest, a heavy silence had fallen.

Vya gently pushed his mother's arms aside and stood, then walked across the room to where Demon sat holding her son. Marcus was being rather more clingy than usual, and Demon knew her son was picking up on the tension in the room, reacting to it by hugging her and Half-Ted, who was clutched tightly to Marcus' chest. The teddy bear's ear was gripped firmly in the little boy's mouth.

Marcus and his mother both looked warily at Vya as he approached, although Demon tried to give him an encouraging smile. Vya stopped a meter or so from her, and pointed at Half-Ted, asking, "What's

that?"

"It's a teddy bear," Demon explained, aware that Marcus had clutched the toy even more tightly to him. "He's called Half-Ted, and he's Marcus' very best friend, apart from his cousins."

Demon smiled at Lily's children, while mentally noting that it was a close run thing between Marcus' love of Dasha and his love for Half-Ted. Faylinn and Naima didn't even get close.

"He's very nice. I've never seen a teddy bear before." Vya smiled sweetly, then turned to his mother and asked, "Mommy? Can I have a teddy bear, please? I want one just like Marcus', with only one ear."

The adults laughed, and Ilas quietly explained that teddy bears usually came with two ears, but having only one was what made Half-Ted unique. Vya nodded seriously, then turned back to Marcus and smiled sadly.

"You're very lucky to have such a great bear. I wish I had one."

Marcus looked at the other little boy carefully, and Demon could almost hear the cogs whirring in her son's brain. This wasn't the same Vya who had mocked Half-Ted, and shaken Marcus' confidence so badly. Both he and his mother could feel the difference in Vya, now they knew what to look for. Demon hadn't been able to pick up much from the child when he'd been possessed, but what she had sensed hadn't endeared her to him. He'd seemed cold and remote, which Demon now understood to be attributes of the evil that had taken over his body. At the time, she'd thought he'd inherited some of his father's less attractive qualities, and had regretted that Vya wasn't more like his mother. Now she knew better. Vya was actually a warm and affectionate child. Demon could now sense that warmth, and she suspected that Marcus could, too.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Marcus suddenly stretched out his arm and held Half-Ted out toward Vya. He said, "You can play with him for a bit, if you like," while wriggling off Demon's knee and standing on his own for the first time since entering the room.

Vya's face lit up, and Demon could feel his happiness and gratitude for the gesture. "Gosh, thanks! I'll be very careful with him. You must love him lots."

Marcus nodded seriously and the two boys went off to the corner of the room together to play. After a few seconds, Faylinn and Dasha squirmed down from Lily's lap and joined them.

Demon sighed and smiled at her sisters, then said quietly, "I just wish the adults could make up and be friends again that easily."

Dureena looked up from where she was cradling Ilori gently, and narrowed her yellow eyes. "Is Captain very angry with Max?" It was obvious that the thief knew both men well enough to predict their reactions.

Demon nodded. "Matthew never leaves anyone behind, and the loss of one of his crew hurts him terribly. I'm afraid he blames Max for Takeshiba's death."

Ilas sat up straighter and protested. "That's not fair! Max didn't know what was in the Box. He couldn't have predicted what would happen."

Demon sighed again. "That's not what Alwyn told us. He said the messages on the walls outside the room

would have been clear to anyone with Max's linguistic skills. If Max had paused long enough to translate the writing, he would have known not to go in there, and certainly not to remove the Box."

There was a long silence before Ilas said softly, "But he did translate them. We waited outside while he went over all the writing and hieroglyphics. He said they weren't important."

Demon shuddered. If Max had put his own son's life at risk by his greed, she wondered if Ilas and Dureena would ever forgive him. She couldn't sense Ilas' feelings, but the anger that swept through Dureena was like a burning flame. Before the little thief could react, Ilas leaped to her feet and rushed across to calm her partner.

"Give him a chance to explain, Dureena. Trust him. We have to believe he didn't know."

Demon wished she could share that belief.

25th August 2272

Gideon stood in the landing bay with one arm around his wife's waist. Everyone had gathered there to say their goodbyes, and the four sisters had yet again parted emotionally. His own parting from Dureena had been affectionate, but he and Max hadn't spoken.

Max, Ilas and Dureena were about to board their shuttle back to the surface, when Alwyn swept into the room, with Galen following close behind. Both Technomages were dressed in black, Alwyn in full robes and cloak, while Galen wore his usual hooded long coat. They both wielded their staffs like weapons, and to Gideon, they looked like carrion crows descending on the scene of a kill.

"Stop!" Alwyn's voice was a command that froze Max and his partners in their tracks. Dureena still carried Ilori, while Ilas held Vya tightly by the hand. Neither woman had spoken to Eilerson since entering the landing bay. Gideon wondered whether the damage done to their relationship could ever be repaired. Could they ever forgive Max for what he had done? The Captain found that he didn't really care, except for a slight preference for Dureena and Ilas leaving the xeno-archeologist. That would mean Deborah could see her youngest sister, and Gideon could see Dureena, without having Max's company inflicted on them all.

Alwyn held up his staff in what seemed an almost threatening gesture as he went on, "You may not leave this ship while that Box remains on the planet. I do not trust you, Maximilian Eilerson. Galen and I will remove the temptation of the Box from your grasp before you return to your work."

Max flushed slightly, and spoke in a sarcastic tone. "You don't need to worry, Alwyn. I have no intention of going anywhere near that thing. You don't think I enjoyed being mentally subjugated by it, do you? It's not an experience I wish to repeat."

Those were the first words Max had spoken for days that Gideon felt he could believe. For someone like Max, the mental suppression he had undergone would have been particularly harrowing. His innate arrogance and superiority would have taken a severe knock. Somehow, that idea appealed to the Captain.

Alwyn nodded and said, "I doubt if it is, but nevertheless, we will remove that enticement. Stay here for thirty minutes after we leave. Then you may return to the dig."

While Alwyn was talking, Sarah walked into the landing bay, holding Jaysen's hand as he toddled along beside her. The doctor's son was less than eighteen months old, but he ran along at his mother's side, appearing quite contented to follow where she led.

Sarah said her farewells quickly, with a quick hug for each of the sisters, a longer hug for Dureena and a wink and a squeeze for the Captain. She shook hands professionally with Luke, and gave John a friendly salute, knowing that the telepath avoided casual physical contact. Within minutes, she had ascended the ramp to Alwyn's ship, Jaysen trotting beside her, and vanished.

Alwyn paused in front of the Captain and said, "Your hospitality is generous as always, Captain. In future, perhaps you could invite us to stay when things are a little less exciting. A man of my age doesn't need much excitement in his life. Sarah provides me with all I can handle." The twinkle in the Technomage's eye convinced Gideon that he was teasing, so he responded in kind.

"One of these days I'll set Deborah on you, then I'll find out just how old you are, and how much excitement you can really stand." Gideon's smile faded, and his next words were spoken with complete sincerity. "In the meantime, take care of yourself, and especially take care of Sarah. She's very precious to us all."

Alwyn nodded and held out his hand, which Gideon took and shook firmly. The older Technomage swept off into his ship and the ramp lifted behind him.

Galen moved to stand in front of Gideon next, and nodded his goodbye. "I'll see you again when I'm least wanted and most needed. Or vice versa. Expect me when you see me." And he, too, swept away into his own ship.

Gideon turned to Ilas, Dureena and Max, where they stood on the shuttle ramp, watching the scene below. "You can come back and wait in comfort until Alwyn's deadline has passed, or you can wait in the shuttle. It's up to you."

Max glared at Gideon and without a word span on his heel and entered the shuttle. Dureena and Ilas shared a glance, then waved goodbye and joined their partner. Gideon heard Deborah sigh deeply at his side and turned to look at her.

"They've got a lot of work to do, and a lot of wounds to heal. It won't be easy for any of them."

Gideon kissed Deborah's cheek and murmured, "None of this has been easy for any of us. There have been too many innocent victims of Max's greed this time. He'll have to suffer the consequences."

Deborah looked up at him as they left the landing bay, Lily, Angel, Luke and John immediately behind them. She whispered, "But it won't just be Max who's suffering, Matthew. Dureena and Ilas are suffering, too."

Gideon nodded. "I know. But it's their choice. They could leave him if they wanted to. I made damned sure Dureena knew that if she needed a new home, we'd help her and Ilas in any way we could. She told me she'd think about it. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

As the doors to the landing bay closed behind them, and they listened to the noise of the two Technomage ships starting up, Gideon wondered just how long they'd have to wait. Would Ilas and Dureena leave Max, taking their children with them? Or would they stay, trying to repair the damage? He had no idea.

All he was sure of was that he never wanted to see Max's face again.

Max Eilerson was persona non grata on the Excalibur, and as far as Gideon was concerned, that status was permanent.

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

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four O

{[Part 1: Shifting Sands](#)}