

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Four O - Part 1: Shifting Sands

by *The Space Witches*



Dureena has a difficult decision to make.

Chapter 1

16th August 2272

Gideon strode through the corridors of his ship, smiling to himself. He had some good news for his wife and her sisters, and he was looking forward to delivering it. As always when he prowled the ship, he kept his eyes and ears open, gauging the emotional temperature of his crew. Once, he'd been forced to put down an attempted mutiny on his previous ship, the EAS Phoenix. Those circumstances had been exceptional, but ever since, Gideon had always made sure he knew exactly what his crew was thinking and feeling.

In the nearly three years since his wife and son had come to live with him on the Excalibur, they had been a help and support to him in his relationships with the people working on board. Deborah and Marcus regularly joined the Captain in the mess halls for dinner, and Marcus was a general favorite. Only their close friends and relatives knew that the toddler's angelic looks concealed a mischievous nature worthy of his parentage.

Crewmembers nodded and smiled at the Captain as he walked past, not stopping what they were doing, but acknowledging his presence, just as they should. Gideon smiled and nodded back.

What few of them knew was that in Deborah he had a hidden ace up his sleeve. As an empath, she could tell him immediately if the crew's mood shifted. When she joined him at various ship's functions, his wife could sense exactly what his people were feeling, individually and en masse. What she had been telling Gideon recently was that he had a happy crew. They were pleased with the successes they had achieved on the missions given them by the President, and they were proud to be working aboard the flagship of the

ISA.

All was well with the world.

[Which means it's time for someone to come along and rain on my parade.] Gideon smiled at his own pessimism as he swung himself aboard a bullet car.

The problem was that his cynicism was justified, and he knew exactly who would be seeding the clouds.

"That's not fair! You promised!" Marcus' voice screeched, as Gideon entered his old quarters, to find Deborah just rising from the desk there.

"That doesn't sound good." Gideon cocked his head in the direction of his old bedroom, now given over to his son.

"They've been playing quietly for ages. I should have known trouble was brewing." Deborah moved swiftly ahead of her husband and pushed the door to the bedroom fully open.

Gideon stuck his head around the doorpost to see the four children inside. Little Naima, not yet two years old, was sitting with her back to the bed, sucking on the corner of the bedcover, watching the other, older children with large, round eyes.

Faylinn and Marcus were standing glaring at each other, both with their hands on their hips, while Dasha looked on in despair. Gideon sighed to himself. [Here we go again!] He checked quickly, relieved to see Half-Ted on the bed. The teddy bear was well out of range of the combatants, with his arms and legs still connected to his body.

Deborah stooped and grabbed Faylinn quickly, intercepting the little girl's hand just as she swung at her cousin. Gideon leaped forward and hastily pulled Marcus back, as he tried to hit Faylinn in turn.

*Gideon yelled, "Quit it! Yell if you have to, but you will *not* start hitting each other. Now what's all this about?" He pulled his squirming son into his arms. Marcus stared up at his father and pouted.*

"She started it!" It was hardly the first time Marcus had used that expression. Unfortunately, it was often accurate. Faylinn did start most of the arguments between the children, but usually only after Marcus had provoked her.

Before the children could tell them more, Deborah interrupted. "I don't want to hear any more about whose fault it was or who started it. Dasha, Faylinn, and Naima are due back in their quarters around now anyway. I'll take them home, while you," she turned and frowned at Marcus, "tidy up in here." She gestured with her chin at the toys strewn around the room, holding Faylinn tightly in her arms, where the little girl couldn't get at her cousin.

*Dasha rose obediently from the floor, and held his hand out to his little sister, saying quietly, "Come on, Ima. Time to go home." The serious little boy looked up and smiled tentatively at Deborah. "Thank you for having us, Auntie Demon. And Marcus was right. She *did* promise."*

With an apologetic smile, Dasha led Naima from the bedroom, with Deborah trying hard to hide her grin as she followed with the still protesting Faylinn.

When the door closed behind them, Gideon lowered his son to the floor. "OK, you can tell me what happened while we tidy up." He started to pick up toys and drop them into the box in the corner, gesturing at Marcus to follow his example.

Marcus took a deep breath, and his words came out in a rush. "We were playing Mummies and Daddies and Flynn said she wanted to see mine and she'd show me hers but when I showed her mine she grabbed it and pulled it and it hurt and I yelled and then she wouldn't show me hers and I got cross because she promised and it's not fair!"

Gideon blinked several times as he absorbed the flood of information, chewing at the inside of his lip to stop himself laughing. Dropping the last of the toys into the box, he sat on the bed and swung his son up onto his knee.

"OK, there are a number of lessons you should learn from this, Marcus. First, and most important, keep your pants zipped around women for a few years. It's going to be a long time yet before any girl will want to do anything there that you'll enjoy. Keep it to yourself. OK?" Marcus nodded seriously. Gideon decided that Faylinn must have pulled hard.

"Second, if a girl says she'll show you hers if you show her yours, make sure she goes first. Third, you didn't miss much. Girls don't have much to show."

Marcus frowned then looked up at Gideon. "Is Mummy a girl?"

Gideon nodded seriously, wondering just where this conversation might take him. Marcus was only three and a half years old. A little young for a man-to-man talk about sex.

Marcus digested this information then smiled. "Then some girls are nice. I like Mummy."

Gideon laughed and hugged his son. "So do I, Marcus. So do I."

By the time Deborah returned, Marcus was helping his father set the table for dinner, and the smell of pizza was wafting through the room. Gideon watched as Deborah stopped to help Marcus get the cutlery in the right places, and listened as she agreed that he could go through to the room next door to watch TV. She then moved through to the kitchen, where Gideon had gone back to putting a salad together.

Deborah put her arms around Gideon's waist, and he felt her lips touch the side of his neck, sending a shiver of pleasure down his spine. He stopped what he was doing, turned, and put his arms around her, pulling her close, and kissing her. When they broke apart, he looked into her smiling eyes and lifted his hand to caress her face.

"You OK with pizza for dinner? I know we said we'd eat in the mess hall tonight, but I've got some news for you."

Deborah raised her eyebrows in query, and moved one hand quickly to snatch a piece of tomato from the salad bowl. Gideon laughed and slapped her hand away as she asked, "What news? Good news?"

"I'll tell you over dinner. Did you get the kids back to Lily's without any more fights?"

Deborah nodded and sighed. "Dasha, Faylinn, and Naima don't fight among themselves very much. You have to add Marcus to the mix to get the fireworks. He and Faylinn just set each other off. They're nearly as bad as you and Angel." She gave him a mischievous smile, making Gideon laugh.

"Let's hope they grow out of it. Did Faylinn tell you what she'd done?" Deborah shook her head. By the time Gideon had finished explaining, she was spluttering with laughter.

"I thought they were too quiet in there! That'll teach Marcus to keep himself to himself for a few years."

Gideon pulled her closer, grinding his hips against hers, whispering into her ear, "If I show you mine later, will you promise not to pull it too hard?"

Deborah gave a dirty chuckle. "If it's hard, I won't need to pull it, will I?"

Gideon laughed and pushed her away. "OK, you get Marcus to wash his hands—just for once we know exactly where they've been—and I'll serve dinner. Then later we'll decide what gets pulled and what doesn't."

Deborah turned to walk away, and Gideon swatted her butt as she went. He watched the smooth sway of her hips in her black jeans, and wondered how he'd survived for so many years without her and Marcus. Life was good.

"So what's the news?" Demon wiped her mouth with her napkin, and then leaned across to do the same for Marcus. Much as he loved pizza, Marcus seemed to miss his mouth nearly as often as he hit it. He always seemed to end up wearing nearly as much of the topping as he ate. Looking up at Matthew, she saw him smile. Whatever he had to tell her, it was something good.

"We changed course this afternoon. The visit to Ceti Gamma III, to join the independence celebrations, has been cancelled."

Demon was surprised that Matthew sounded so cheerful about his news. She knew he'd been looking forward to going back to the planet they'd visited just over a year before. Matthew's memories of the place were a lot more positive than his wife's. He'd liked the Governor and his wife, he'd won a lot of credits at poker, and he knew nothing about the traumas that Demon and Angel had suffered there.

Matthew thought that Angel had been upset by a stupid comment made by one of her dancing partners at the masquerade ball, but he knew nothing of Angel's encounter with Lucas Buck. No one, not even her sisters, knew that Demon had also met Lucas, and no one knew about the choices he had offered her. Demon pushed those memories aside and concentrated on looking cheerful and interested in what her husband had to say next.

"We're going to Cygnus 36 instead. We'll be there in just over two days."

It took Demon a moment to register the name, then her smile spread across her face, and she couldn't stop a ripple of happiness escaping her.

"Cygnus 36? But that's where Ilas is! Are we really going to see Ilas again?" It was almost too good to be true. It had been nearly a year since Demon had seen her youngest sister, although they exchanged messages regularly.

Gideon grinned. "Yes, you're really going to see Ilas. Sadly, I'm really going to see Max Eilerson, too. He comes as part of the package. But at least Dureena will be with them. That sort of makes up for the bad news about Max." The Captain told himself that it could have been worse. The family reunion could have involved Technomages, too. Living and dead.

Demon laughed, knowing her husband didn't dislike Max nearly as much as he made out. She was about to tell him so, when Marcus interrupted. "Who's Ilas?"

The question startled Demon at first. Then she realized Marcus had been too young to remember his aunt from her previous visits. The explanation about his other aunt, and her family, occupied the time spent clearing up from dinner, giving Marcus his bedtime bath, and getting him into bed.

Demon sat on the side of her son's bed, stroking the curls back from his forehead as he nodded off, Half-Ted tucked safely under his arm. When he was finally asleep, she rose and went through to her quarters, where Matthew was lying on the sofa, reading a datapad.

Demon paused in the doorway, taking in the long, lean length of her husband, as he lay flat out, dressed in a T-shirt and his uniform pants, with his boots and socks kicked off. [Even his feet are sexy,] Demon thought to herself, as a surge of warmth swept through her. Matthew held the datapad above him with one hand, while his other arm rested behind his head. Suppressing her wave of lust, Demon moved to kneel by the sofa, pushing the datapad to one side.

She kept her voice low and husky as she said, "I think you had something to show me? Something I'm supposed to pull, but not too hard."

Matthew grinned and sat up abruptly, throwing the datapad aside. Before she knew it, Demon was flat on her back, with her husband pinning her to the floor. She looked up into his golden eyes and saw the passion there as he growled, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours. Like I told Marcus, always make sure the girl goes first."

Gideon lay back in bed, his arm around his wife as she rested her head on his shoulder. He was sliding into sleep when her voice brought him back to lazy consciousness, but he was barely awake.

"You didn't tell me why we changed course. What's happening on Cygnus 36?"

Gideon opened one eye and looked down at Deborah. Her hair fell around her shoulders and across his chest like a cloak, covering them both. The golden brown of her eyes was almost lost in the black of her pupils, dilated with a mixture of sleepiness and lust. Her lips were red and puffy where he'd kissed her, and her cheeks were still flushed with exertion from their recent activities.

The Captain decided that his wife never looked quite as fuckable as she did when she'd just been thoroughly fucked. He wondered whether he could distract Deborah from her question by arousing her again. It wouldn't take much in her current condition, but Gideon knew he'd better be damned sure he could satisfy her if he played that game. For once, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

Kissing his wife gently on the forehead, the Captain sighed. "The mining colony has been having a few problems. No one from the IPX group has been hurt, but there have been some unexplained deaths among the miners. The Rangers have reported back to the ISA about the miners' troubles. Sheridan knows about our connections with the IPX expedition, so he's asked me and Luke to investigate."

Deborah sat up abruptly, looking concerned. Gideon reached up and pulled her back down into his arms.

"Don't worry. Whatever the problem is, it seems to be confined to the colony. Anyway, Ilas and Dureena can take care of themselves and the children." He snorted with amusement, trying to divert Deborah's attention. "Sadly, they'll probably take care of Max, too. Personally, I'd like it if someone put a big sign around his neck saying, 'Next target. Aim here.' But they probably won't let me use Max for bait, will they?"

Deborah laughed and gently hit Gideon's arm. "You'd be mortified if anything bad happened to Max."

The Captain's instant mental response was, [Only because someone got there before me,] but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself.

19th August 2272

Excalibur - mid afternoon

"Well, Max, you look fit. Are Ilas and Dureena making sure you get regular exercise?" Gideon grinned at the xeno-archeologist, hoping to catch some indication of embarrassment at the comment. Max Eilerson hadn't changed a bit in the years since he'd left the Excalibur. [Well, maybe a little less coverage on top, and a little more around the middle, but nothing major.] Gideon thought to himself. If anyone had asked, he would have instantly denied feeling proud of his own luxuriant hair and flat belly.

Max wasn't falling for Gideon's ploy for an instant. He grinned back, "They use the same exercise regime that I've heard Demon uses on you, Captain. A daily cardio-vascular workout, accompanied by rigorous massage and vigorous calisthenics. Sound familiar?"

Gideon roared with laughter. "Damned right it does. These women are determined to keep us fit and active well into our dotage, Max."

Eilerson raised a supercilious eyebrow. "I may be older than you, Captain, but I can assure you, my dotage is still in the dim and distant future."

Gideon waved the linguist to the conference table while he held his arms out slowly toward his favorite thief. He'd learned long ago not to make sudden moves around Dureena. She kept too many sharp objects concealed in unexpected places.

The little Zanderi hugged the Captain hard, and then looked up at him, grinning. "You're looking pretty fit yourself, Captain. You must be enjoying life."

Gideon smiled down at the thief, thinking how well she looked, and how she had regained her spectacular figure since giving birth the previous year. Dureena's curves were delightfully displayed by the tight fitting leather outfit she wore, and for a moment, the Captain found it hard to drag his eyes away from her amazing cleavage.

"Life is very good indeed, Dureena," Gideon agreed enthusiastically, and gestured for Dureena to sit, joining Max, John Matheson, Luke Raven and the leader of the mining colony at the table. The miners' leader was a short, stocky man, with a mop of dark curly hair and thick dark eyebrows overhanging sharp, blue

eyes. He leaned forward on the table, clasping hands with long, unexpectedly delicate fingers in front of him.

Gideon nodded in his direction as he sat. "Mr. Brennan. Thank you for joining us. President Sheridan's office has outlined some of the difficulties you've been experiencing, but perhaps you could fill us in on the details."

The Captain sat back and listened as the miner started his story.

Angel looked down at Ilori, sleeping peacefully in her arms, and decided that if all babies were so well behaved she might someday reconsider having children of her own. Then Marcus stampeded through Lily's living room, shrieking at Vya, who was running ahead, waving Half-Ted in the air. [Then again…]

Ilas stretched out an arm as Vya charged past her, and neatly retrieved the battered bear, giving it back to Marcus, who hugged it closely then ran to Demon, seeking solace in his mother's arms. Demon picked up her son and cuddled him, while Ilas admonished Vya quietly, telling him not to tease his cousins. The picture of domesticity was completed by Dasha and Faylinn sitting on the floor playing quietly, while Naima dozed in Lily's arms.

Angel shook her head, concealing a smile. The contrast with the days when the sisters had used to get together on Eriadne couldn't have been greater. [Well, that was four years and six children ago. It's only natural that things are different now.]

Nevertheless, Angel felt a wave of regret as she thought back on those days. The four of them had used to have such fun together. While they had all taken their responsibilities to the villagers seriously, they had enjoyed life, too. Angel remembered times when they'd laughed until they cried, raided the kitchens at midnight, and got squiffy on the new wines provided by the Brakiri. Happy times. Looking down at the baby in her arms, Angel decided that these days weren't so bad, either. It was good for the four sisters to be together again, albeit briefly.

Demon wiped Marcus' face, then pulled him close against her, smiling and saying, "We may be surrounded by children, but that doesn't mean we have to talk about them exclusively. Much as I love this little one," she leaned forward and gently kissed the top of her son's head where it rested against her shoulder, "I'm still interested in other things. So tell us about this latest expedition, Ilas. Have you found anything interesting yet?"

Ilas frowned. "I think so, but Max won't say exactly what it is." She bit her lip and looked at her sisters anxiously. "I'm a bit worried about some of the things that have been happening, actually. I don't know quite what to do."

Lily leaned forward and placed her hand on her sister's arm, saying soothingly, "Tell us about it, Ilas. Maybe we can help you decide."

Ilas nodded, sending her blue hair cascading around her shoulders. "OK, but let's get the kids settled first. Ilori is fast asleep over there," she smiled at Angel, "Naima's in the same state and Marcus looks as if he's about to drop off." Ilas nodded at Demon's son where he sat on his mother's knee, sucking on Half-Ted's ear, half asleep.

With a token protest from Faylinn, the children, with the exception of Vya, were tucked up in bed in the twins' room for an afternoon nap. Vya insisted that he wasn't tired, and as far as Angel could tell, he was telling the truth.

It was odd to see how much older than the other children Vya now looked, even though he was several months younger than Marcus and the twins. At not quite three years old, Vya looked and behaved more like six or seven. Angel decided he must take after Ilas in almost every way. Her species matured much more quickly than humans did, and Vya showed the same growth pattern as his mother. In fact, the only things Angel could see that identified Vya as Max Eilerson's son were his bright blue eyes, a sharp wit that glittered behind those eyes, and a sharp tongue to match.

As the four sisters settled down to talk in Lily's living room, Vya curled up at Ilas' feet and listened. He had chosen a completely human form for the visit, and the only clue to his shape-shifting abilities was that he had made his hair exactly the same shade of blue as his mother's.

Demon watched her youngest sister with concern. Since their emotional reunion in the landing bay, the tall blonde had sensed that something was on Ilas' mind. Demon had never been able to read her sisters' emotions as she could others, but she could always sense when they were unhappy or distressed. And that was exactly how Ilas was feeling.

Taking advantage of a brief moment when Ilas and Angel were distracted, Demon had quickly checked with Lily through their link, and the redhead had confirmed Demon's thoughts. Lily had always been closest to Ilas, and she was more attuned to their youngest sister's feelings. She had told Demon that something was bothering Ilas badly. Between them, they had quickly plotted to persuade Ilas to tell them what was disturbing her, and Demon had taken the next opportunity to steer the conversation in the direction she wanted.

Now she sat back and listened carefully as Ilas told her story.

"There's been a mining colony on Cygnus 36 for a year or so now, but they only discovered the ruins a few months ago. As you know, Max, Dureena and I went back to Mars after Ilori was born, to give Dureena time to recuperate after the birth. When IPX offered Max the chance to lead the expedition here, Dureena and I talked it over, and we told him he should accept. Ilori is growing like a weed, and Dureena has completely recovered, so there was no reason for us to hang around Mars any longer.

"When we got out here two months ago, we set up camp near the ruins, with our full equipment and camping gear. We brought pretty much everything with us, including the kitchen sink, so we're totally independent from the miners. Even so, they come out and visit the site and we go into their camp to swap supplies. It works well, and we're all very comfortable. At least we were, until…"

Ilas trailed off, frowning. Demon leaned forward in her seat, noticing that Vya was looking up anxiously at his mother. "Until what? Tell us what happened, Ilas."

Ilas nodded her expression clearing as she went on. "Four weeks ago, Max asked Dureena and me for help. He'd discovered an entrance to a part of the ruins no one had been in before, deep underground. The entrance was narrow, it had a lot of locks and traps, and Max knew it wasn't going to be easy to get into. But he was very excited about some records he'd found. He said that it would be worth it if we could get in, as there was something very valuable down there."

Ilas smiled, saying, "Between Dureena and me, there's not much can stand in our way, but this one was tough. It took us nearly a day to get through to the core, although it wasn't that far below ground, but we had to go very slowly. There were tunnels and barriers, dead falls, booby traps, narrow ledges and horrible drops. It was like something out of an old-fashioned adventure story!"

Something about Ilas' description made Demon think of a 20th century movie, and she murmured, "Indiana Jones, eat your heart out." Only Angel laughed. Lily, Ilas, and Vya just looked puzzled, so Demon gestured to Ilas to continue her story.

"Finally, we got into the central chamber. That was fun, I can tell you! I had to grow a tail for Max to hang on to, to get him across the floor. I was desperately disappointed when after all that effort we only found a stone chest. Max wasn't disappointed though. He was very excited. He still wouldn't tell us what he thought was inside, but he helped Dureena and I carry it out." Ilas grinned. "Well, he tried to help. Frankly, he was more of a hindrance than a help, but don't tell him that."

Ilas' affection for her partner glowed in her violet eyes. Demon could see that her little sister still felt happy and well loved by Max and Dureena. The tall blonde was relieved, as she'd initially been worried that Ilas' distress was caused by problems in her relationship with her partners. Fortunately, that wasn't the case. They were taking care of Ilas, as Demon had hoped they would, loving her and treasuring her uniqueness.

The youngest witch continued. "We got the chest back to the camp, and Max locked it away in a separate building. He hasn't told his team about it, and he won't let anyone else near it. He spends hours in there studying it, but he still won't tell Dureena and me what he thinks it is. But he's excited, I know that much. He hasn't really been himself since he found it though."

Ilas fell silent for a moment, looking worried, her hand gently stroking Vya's blue hair as he stared up at her. After a few moments, Angel prompted her gently, "So what is it that has you worried, Ilas? From what you've told us, Max can often be pretty tight-lipped about his finds. What's so different about this one?"

For just a moment, Demon thought Ilas paled, although it was hard to be sure, as her skin was dead white anyway. The blue haired girl paused, and then said softly, "What's different is that people have been dying."

Gideon listened as Paul Brennan, the mining colony leader, summarized the events of the previous few weeks.

"There were no problems when the IPX team first arrived." He nodded to Max and Dureena. "They set up camp out at the ruins, and it was all very amicable. We traded and socialized, and everyone benefited. Most of my men think the archeologists are nuts, digging around in the dirt out there, instead of in the mines where there's more profit to be made, but we tolerate the high IQ boys and they put up with our rough and ready ways."

Brennan grinned at Max, and to Gideon's surprise, the linguist smiled back. [Max must be mellowing in his old age.]

Brennan's face clouded over as he went on, "Then four weeks ago, we found Isaac's body. He was lying face down on his bed, not a mark on him. We have our own doctor—well, we call him a doctor. Actually, he's more of a paramedic—but the Doc couldn't figure out what had killed him. He didn't have the

equipment to do a full post-mortem, but we couldn't see that it was anything other than natural causes, so we buried old Isaac out in the desert and sent his things to his next of kin."

The miner paused and looked over at Luke Raven, to whom he'd been introduced on arrival on board the Excalibur. "You might want us to dig him up, Doc, so you can look him over. The conditions on the planet mean he should still be in pretty good condition. It's hot and dry down there. We don't get much rain, and we buried him in the sand, so he'll probably be mummified rather than decomposed."

Gideon nodded at his CMO, and couldn't resist saying, "That's the best offer you've had all week, isn't it, Luke?"

Raven glowered back at his Captain, and Gideon suppressed a smile. [Obviously not a Mummy's boy.] He brought his attention back to the miner as Brennan continued his story.

"Ten days after we buried Isaac, we found De Martino dead. Exactly the same thing. Face down in his bed, without a mark on him. Isaac was an old-timer--he drank hard and didn't take care of himself--but De Martino was only in his forties. He was fit and strong, and the Doc had given him a physical only a couple of days before. There was no way Joe should have died in his sleep. So we started to worry that there might be some sort of virus running through the colony, but the Doc couldn't find anything."

Brennan pulled on his lower lip with his long fingers, and Gideon could see that the man wasn't just worried--he was scared. Flicking his eyes around the room, the Captain made another interesting discovery. Dureena was staring at Max, not at the miner. And Max was looking everywhere but at Dureena, deliberately avoiding her gaze. [Interesting.] Gideon decided he'd investigate later, and waved Brennan on.

"A week after De Martino, we found Keiko. She was young and fit, too. Three days later, it was Kelly. We found the last one yesterday. Just like all the others, Royston was dead in his bed. That's five dead in three weeks. We haven't had a single death in the whole time we've been here until..." Brennan fell silent and dropped his head.

Gideon frowned. Leaning forward in his seat, he prompted the miner. "Until? Until what, Mr. Brennan?"

Brennan looked up and gave Max a guilty look. "Until they arrived."

"Mummy?" Marcus' voice was barely audible. He had his face buried in Demon's neck as they sat on the bullet car, Marcus sitting on his mother's knee.

"Yes? Is something wrong?" Demon looked down at her son. He had been very subdued since waking from his nap, and had been a lot more clingy than usual. The tall blonde had decided it was because of the excitement of meeting his new aunt and cousins, but now she wondered if there was another cause. She waited out the long pause that followed her question.

Eventually the little boy asked quietly, "Am I bad if I don't like someone?"

Demon frowned, considering the question. She couldn't remember Marcus ever saying he didn't like someone before. Hated, yes. She smiled as she recalled how often Marcus said he hated someone or something. Anything from brushing his teeth, to eating his greens, and sometimes including his cousins, his parents and whoever else didn't give into his demands.

Kissing her son's head gently, Demon said, "It really depends on who it is and why you don't like them. Did you have someone in mind?" Looking down, she saw Marcus nod. "Who is it you don't like?"

Marcus shook his head, remaining silent. At that moment, the bullet car arrived at their stop, so Demon stood, still holding Marcus in her arms. He was getting heavy to carry any distance, but she could still hold him when she had to. Given his current subdued and clingy mood, Demon decided that this wasn't the time to get him to walk by himself.

Arriving in their quarters, Demon carried her son through to his bedroom, and lowered him to the bed. He was still clutching Half-Ted tightly to his chest, and Demon had to pull one of his hands away to hold onto it while she sent, [[What's the matter, Marcus? Tell Mummy, so she can make it better.]]

That provoked a little smile and Marcus suddenly threw his arms around his mother's neck, hugging her tightly. He whispered in her ear, "I don't like Vya. Is that bad? Do I have to like him?"

Demon hugged her son quickly, then leaned back and looked at him carefully. "No, it's not bad. You don't have to like everybody you meet. But why don't you like Vya? Did he do something?"

Marcus nodded seriously, hugging Half-Ted. His mental voice quivered as he sent, [[He said I was a baby, and only a baby would still play with a baby's toy and Half-Ted is stupid and I'm stupid because I love Half-Ted.]] The little boy's eyes filled with tears. His face was a picture of desolation as he sent to his mother, and his thoughts broke down into incoherent misery. [[Am I stupid, Mummy?]]

Demon pulled her son into her arms and hugged him hard, then stood quickly, lifting him onto her knee as she sat on his bed. She rocked him for a few moments, sending comforting thoughts and feelings, until Marcus calmed down. Then she put her fingers under his chin and lifted it, until the little boy had to look up at her.

Suppressing a wave of anger that Vya had upset Marcus so badly, Demon said quietly and seriously, "No, you're not stupid. Never think that. You're my wonderful, bright boy, and I love you very much." This seemed to cheer Marcus a little, so Demon went on, "Vya doesn't understand how important Half-Ted is to us. He doesn't know that your Daddy brought Half-Ted half way across the galaxy for you, before you were born. You were still a baby, so you don't remember those first few months when Daddy couldn't be with us, but all that time, Half-Ted watched over us for him. It's not stupid to love Half-Ted, Marcus. He's a very important bear. Half-Ted shows how much your Daddy loves us both."

Marcus' face lit up with relief and happiness. "So it's OK for me to love Half-Ted? And I can take him with me everywhere?"

Demon laughed softly. "You can take Half-Ted anywhere you want, Marcus. If Vya teases you about him again, you just tell Vya he's jealous because he doesn't have his own Half-Ted. Now let's get you cleaned up before Daddy gets home."

Gideon unlocked the cabinet where he kept his PPG, bringing it out to lay on the bed, then he reached in and pulled out the separate energy cap. As he assembled the weapon, he was very much aware of his wife watching his every move from where she sat on their bed. The sound of the TV from the living room assured Gideon that his son was occupied, so he flashed a reassuring smile at Deborah, saying quietly, "It's just a precaution. I'm taking G'Tan and a couple of his Marines down with me, so I doubt if I'll need

this at all." He pushed the loaded PPG into the shoulder holster he wore under his jacket, and held his arms out.

Deborah stood and flowed against him, hugging him tightly. She whispered, "Do you have to go down there tonight? Can't it wait until morning?"

Gideon lifted her chin to kiss her gently, and then smiled sadly, shaking his head. "It may be evening up here, but it's early morning down at the ruins. Max, Dureena, and Brennan are going back down with Luke and me. I'll check out the site while Luke examines the bodies. I'll be back in a few hours." His smile turned lascivious as he went on, "If you go to sleep with your legs apart, I'll wake you up in the way you like best."

Deborah gave a dirty chuckle, saying, "When do I ever sleep with my legs together?" Then her face became serious as she said, "Please be careful, Matthew. I have a bad feeling about this place, and what Ilas told us just reinforces that feeling. Can you give me a few minutes to tell you what she said?"

Gideon nodded and pulled his wife down to sit on the bed next to him. She quickly told him everything Ilas had said, about the ruins and the chest Max had found. "It may have nothing to do with what's happening in the mining colony, but Ilas seems to believe they're connected, even if she doesn't know how, and she's worried about Max."

The Captain sat digesting the information in silence. Max had seemed pretty much his normal aggravating self during their meeting. A little quieter than usual perhaps, and rather more tolerant that Gideon remembered him. The Max he'd known in the old days would have returned Brennan's quip about tolerating the archeologists with some acerbic comment.

So why didn't it surprise Gideon that Max could be behind the problems? [Because you know Max of old, that's why.] he told himself. He took a deep breath and turned to his wife, smiling. "Thanks. That's useful. Max is up to his old tricks, is he? I'll deal with it when I get down there."

He went to stand up, but Deborah grasped his arm and looked at him anxiously, "Matthew, please don't let Max know I told you about this. He might not be happy that Ilas said so much, and I don't want to cause trouble for her. I also don't want you walking into danger without proper warning, which is why I'm breaking her confidence. I don't feel very good about it, but I'm scared."

Gideon frowned and pulled Deborah into his arms. He couldn't remember her ever admitting her fear for anything before. [Well, apart from heights.] After a quick hug, he pulled back and smiled. "Scared? You? I thought you were the fearless one?"

Deborah tried to smile back, but couldn't quite manage it. "Ilas is the fearless one, and she's scared, which scares me. Be very careful down there, Matthew. Please?" Her eyes filled with tears and Gideon pulled her back into his arms, holding her closely, whispering reassurances.

After a few moments, he released her and stood. "I have to go. I'll kiss Marcus goodnight on my way out. Don't wait up for me. I'll wake you when I get home."

With one last kiss from his wife, Gideon left the bedroom.

Cygnus 36 - early morning

Gideon stood with his back to an unnaturally regular looking cliff, taking in the view of the excavation site. Piles of rock and sand of varying sizes had been baked brown and dry by the hot sun, now risen just above the horizon. The Captain had left his jacket in the shuttle, and he could feel the heat of the sun prickling the skin of his bare arms. It was already hot and getting hotter. Gideon was glad that for once he'd listened to Luke and he'd let the doctor spray a sun block over all his exposed skin.

Luke Raven had left them a few moments before, escorted by two of the Narn Marines and Paul Brennan. They had headed off toward the mining colony, situated in a gap in the low hills, about a kilometer away from the cliff where Gideon and Eilerson now stood. Dureena waited to one side, watching the two men carefully. She had said very little since leaving the Excalibur, and Gideon was convinced she was seriously worried. He wished she would confide in him, but he could also understand her not wishing to be disloyal to her partner.

The Captain had considered taking the Zanderi thief to one side, and telling her what Deborah had told him, but he had decided against it. That would be a betrayal of Ilas' and Deborah's confidences. Gideon sighed to himself. This was all getting too complicated, and too many people's trust in each other was at stake here. He wondered if he could resolve this problem while keeping all the relationships intact. Well, the best way to do that was to act normally, and that meant needling Max.

Turning to the xeno-archeologist, Gideon asked, "Where exactly is this city of yours then, Max? I wasn't expecting much, but this looks more like a bomb site than a dig."

Eilerson waved imperiously, sweeping his arm wide to include the whole landscape. "Just because it's not visible to the uneducated eye, doesn't mean it isn't there, Captain." Gideon gritted his teeth. He'd almost forgotten what a pain in the ass Max could be. A rumble of sound behind him made it clear that Marine Sergeant G'Tan was amused by the archeologist's tone of voice. The Narn stood at Gideon's shoulder, breathing deeply and smiling broadly, apparently enjoying the dry heat of the planet. Dureena remained silent, statue-like in her stillness.

*Eilerson continued, "These mounds of rubble are what's left of the buildings above ground, but there's more below the surface. Of course, when this city was alive, it was built on the coast." The xeno-archeologist turned and gestured toward the cliff. "I'm sure even *you* noticed how regular this feature is, Captain. What's now a cliff was once a harbor. Where we're standing would have been the dock area, bustling with life and activity."*

Suppressing irritation at Eilerson's patronizing tone, Gideon glanced over at the cliff, then back at the heaps of rubble. "What did this bustling life look like? Have you found pictures?"

Max nodded. "Humanoid, but more reptilian than mammalian to look at. They were bigger than humans, averaging two meters and taller, with heavier bone structure and musculature. You've probably noticed the gravity on this planet is nearly 10% higher than Earth normal. The inhabitants were built appropriately." Eilerson glanced at G'Tan. "In some ways they were more like Narns than humans. They were bald, too."

Given the way Eilerson's hair was thinning, Gideon thought the archeologist was pushing his luck with that comment. He ignored it and nodded, feeling beads of sweat forming on his forehead. A quick glance at Dureena and G'Tan showed that they appeared to enjoy the heat. Gideon gritted his teeth and gestured toward an open sided tent that the archeological team had set up to one side of the site. It provided shade for a group of people sitting at a long table, studying artifacts. The Captain moved in the direction of the tent, hoping that the shade would make him feel a little cooler. He listened as Max described the progress

of the excavations, noticing that the archeologist showed no signs of suffering from the heat. No doubt he'd become acclimatized over the last couple of months. Either that or he refused to sweat just to annoy Gideon.

Arriving at the tent, the Captain found it was much cooler in the shade. The breeze blowing in from the cliff helped keep the temperature under the canopy down. Gideon told himself that he should be grateful it was a dry heat. It would have been far worse if this had been a jungle planet with high humidity, although at least then the landscape wouldn't have been so arid and such an unrelenting shade of brown. Remembering how Narn had looked when he'd last visited that planet, Gideon could understand why G'Tan and his Marines would feel at home here.

The Captain found it hard to pay attention, as Max droned on about the history of the planet. Dureena's strange silence and the artifacts the archeologists were examining distracted him. Strange forms, almost organic in shape, with no clues to their function, were scattered down the length of the table. Nothing in view resembled the chest Deborah had told him about. Max was hiding something.

Moving along the table, Gideon could see that a wide variety of objects had been recovered from the dig, none of which meant anything to him. He interrupted Max abruptly, saying, "If this city was so advanced, why are the miners able to dig up rare minerals nearby? I would have expected all such resources to have been exhausted long ago."

Max gave a supercilious sneer. "You don't strip mine your parks, Captain. The city grew here long before the inhabitants started exploiting the mineral wealth of the area. They'd built over the land, creating urban sprawl for miles. Where the mining colony is now sited appears to have been the local equivalent of Central Park in New York, or Hyde Park in London."

Gideon nodded. It made sense. That was what was so irritating about Max. He was right most of the time, but he didn't need to enjoy it quite so much. Gideon decided to needle the xeno-archeologist a little more.

"So is this all you've found?" He waved at the items laid out on the table. "Not much to show for a couple of months' work, is it?" Gideon knew he was being unfair. The painstaking excavation of a new site was a time-consuming business, and could take months to produce even preliminary results. When Max and his team had been aboard the Excalibur, during the search for a cure to the Drakh plague, they had used what Max had described as 'slash and burn' tactics. They hadn't had time for the niceties. Eilerson had often complained that those methods had destroyed more than they'd revealed. Gideon had been forced to remind him of what was at stake. Repeatedly.

Max refused to rise to the bait. "It may not look much to you, Captain," his tone indicated how little he valued Gideon's opinion, "but I can assure you that some of these artifacts will revolutionize the way the leaders in our field think about this species." It was obvious that Max classed himself amongst those leaders.

Gideon hid a smile and raised his eyebrow at Eilerson. "I wasn't aware that those leaders had any thoughts about this species to revolutionize. Have their remains been found elsewhere? Just how far advanced was their technology, Max? Did they have hyperspace travel?"

Eilerson inclined his head portentously. "There are indications that they traveled to nearby star systems, even founded small colonies, but those colonies did not survive the loss of the home planet. When the climate here changed catastrophically, the species died out."

"How long ago did that happen and why?" Gideon looked curiously at the archeologist.

Max shrugged. "Why? You'll have to ask the planetary ecologists. When, was about ten thousand years ago. Back on Earth you were running around with spears and living in mud huts when these people were reaching for the stars."

It was a sobering thought. Gideon wondered how many other species had lived and died before humanity worked out that the universe didn't revolve around them. He also noticed two things. Max used the word 'you' when talking about the inhabitants of Earth. He still considered himself an outsider. He had also avoided answering Gideon's question about whether this was all he'd found. Max was still trying to hide something.

The Captain pressed harder. "So is this all there is?" He waved at the table, while watching Max closely. A flicker crossed the archeologist's face, but what did it signify? Gideon wasn't sure, but he suspected Max was worried. A quick glance at Dureena showed her maintaining a frozen, expressionless face. She might have been taking lessons from Deborah.

Eilerson shrugged. "There's more stored away. Nothing important." He directed Gideon's attention to one of the artifacts being examined at the table. "This is interesting. It's an energy storage device of some kind, but we haven't yet discovered how it works. What we do know is that it still holds a charge after ten thousand years, which our technology could never achieve. Investigating this could lead…"

Gideon interrupted. "Let's go see the rest." He was far more interested in what Max didn't want to show him. Eilerson always loved to brag about his finds. Anything that he was hiding from view must be either totally trivial, or potentially critical, and in the light of the information Deborah had given him, Gideon was prepared to lay money on the latter. He gave Dureena another sideways glance. This time her head had lifted and she was looking keenly at Eilerson, obviously intent on seeing his response to the Captain's order.

Max stopped in mid-speech and stared at Gideon, his face showing a glimmer of hostility, which was soon smoothed over. "There's nothing of interest stored away, Captain. There's another device here that might interest you though…"

Gideon cut him off again. "Indulge me, Max. Let's start with the boring stuff and work up to interesting. Lead the way." He watched the xeno-archeologist carefully, wondering just how hard he'd have to push, and how long it would take Max to realize that he was going to have to show Gideon everything he'd found. They hadn't discussed what authority the Captain had over the investigation and the decisions made as a result, but they both knew that Gideon could close the dig down if he really wanted to. One call the President Sheridan could get IPX's excavation permits cancelled.

Eilerson gave the Captain a long, hard look, before nodding reluctantly and leading the way out of the tent, away from the cliff edge. Gideon followed, with G'Tan hard on his heels and Dureena bringing up the rear, as Max led them through a labyrinth of pathways, winding back and forth between the mounds of rubble. Out in the full force of the sun it was hotter than ever, and Gideon began to regret not bringing a hat with him, not that a hat would have helped deflect the heat radiating from the rocks on either side of the path. As he walked, he adjusted the holster in which he carried his PPG, to stop it chafing under his arm.

Max set a brisk pace. Gideon followed closely, making sure his breathing gave no sign of strain from the

heat, the extra gravity, and the pace. There was no way he'd give Max the satisfaction of seeing him winded. G'Tan and Dureena trotted effortlessly behind, the Narn Marine scanning the hills, resting the PPG rifle he carried over one shoulder.

Before they had left the Excalibur, Eilerson had tried to tell the Marine Sergeant that his weaponry was unnecessary, that there were no dangers on the planet. G'Tan had stared the archeologist down, saying, "People are dying. You don't know why. That's why we're here. My Marines will carry arms at all times." The Narn's tone had brooked no argument, and Gideon had seen Dureena nodding in agreement, as she listened to the conversation between the Marine and her partner.

When Max had turned on his heel and stormed into the shuttle without a word, Gideon had enjoyed seeing him fail to get the last word for once. At the time, the Captain had felt a little guilty about how much enjoyment he'd got from that. Now he was suffering from a grueling route march in the heat, Gideon found himself having fantasies about exactly what he'd like to do to Max with G'Tan's PPG rifle. He told himself that Deborah would be very unhappy with him if he ordered G'Tan to insert the rifle somewhere deep and dark, but the thought was tempting anyway, and it helped distract him from the heat.

Max came to an abrupt halt in front of a heap of rocks that looked identical to every other heap of rocks they'd passed on the way. He gestured in a very precise way, and one of the larger boulders dropped back into the ground, revealing an entrance just large enough for the humans and Narn to squeeze through. Gideon smiled to himself as he thought that Dureena wouldn't have needed an entrance anything like so big. She could apparently slip through the tiniest of cracks.

Gideon sighed and turned to Max. "Suddenly I feel like Alice. OK, Max, make like a white rabbit and I'll follow you down the hole."

Eilerson looked amused and muttered something about needing a timepiece, and then he turned and stooped, leading the way into the darkness.

Excalibur - late evening

Demon walked out of Marcus' bedroom and glanced at the clock on the wall of the living room. 21:00 ship's time and Matthew had been gone for two hours. It seemed much longer somehow, perhaps because she was scared for him. That wasn't anything new; Demon often worried about what would happen to her husband when he left the ship, but this time it was worse. This time, Demon had an uncomfortable feeling he could be facing something he didn't understand.

Settling herself on the sofa, Demon picked up a book and tried to distract herself. Ten minutes later she realized that she was still on the same page, and hadn't taken in a thing she'd read. [Enough!]

She laid the book carefully to one side, then stood, and moved back through the connecting door to Matthew's old quarters. They still used his old living area as an office, and had kept his old desk in place. Demon sat behind it and signaled the comm. officer on the bridge. A few seconds later, Lt Siddhartha's face appeared on the viewscreen.

"Can I help you, Mrs. Gideon?"

Demon smiled. She had managed to get the crew to relax enough to call her Demon when they were off

duty, but when they were at their stations she was always 'Mrs. Gideon.'

The tall blonde explained what she wanted, then waited for Siddhartha to put the call through. A few minutes later, another image appeared on the screen. Demon's face lit up with her smile.

"Hello! I hoped you'd be home. I'm afraid I have a favor to ask…"

Cygnus 36 - late morning

Gideon glanced around the room into which Max had led them. Its bare walls appeared to be carved from the rock around them, and the floor was gritty underfoot. Tables had been set up against the walls, and fragments of items were scattered along them. Max waved at the tables in a dismissive fashion.

"As I told you, Captain, there's nothing of any interest here. We just store the broken pieces of pottery here, and other fragments we've excavated. Anything of value or interest is taken to the main sorting area I showed you earlier."

Moving closer to the tables, the Captain nodded. There didn't appear to be anything of interest here. There was certainly nothing resembling the chest Deborah had told him about. After perusing the finds in silence for a moment, Gideon turned to Eilerson, very much aware that Dureena was watching them both carefully. In fact, she looked like a cat, wound up tightly, ready to spring when her prey moved into range.

"So why keep all this stuff here? Why the secrecy?"

Max shrugged. "There's no secrecy. Everyone knows where these things are, and any of my team can get in here. We store these things here because the room is cool and dry. No other reason."

The room was indeed much cooler than outside under the hot sun. Gideon had been relieved when they had ducked through the opening and found the underground corridors much fresher than he'd expected. Max had explained that the energy storage devices he'd tried to show the Captain earlier still powered the air circulation and lighting systems underground. For a moment, Gideon wondered if he'd misjudged the situation. Maybe Max was right. Maybe the power cells were the more important finds. Maybe Ilas and Deborah had been getting themselves worked up over nothing. [And maybe Max has grown wings, and will be joining a convoy of other pigs flying over the dig.]

Gideon looked at Dureena, and he could see her tension. If Ilas and Deborah were worried about what Max had found, then Dureena shared their concerns. And Gideon had never known the Zanderi thief to be frightened of shadows. Dureena's fear was almost palpable, and the Captain wanted to know what was behind it.

He turned to Max and pressed him again. "Is this everything? Is there anything else you haven't showed me?"

Max frowned. "Were you looking for something in particular, Captain? Do you think it's something we've found that's causing the deaths? What makes you think that?" The xeno-archeologist tried to look innocent, but his face wasn't really built for it. Max had a mobile face, which could assume many expressions--including annoyance, righteous indignation, and highhanded arrogance--but innocence wasn't one of them.

The Captain stood with his hands on his hips, eyes narrowed as he stared Max down. "I don't believe in coincidences, Max. The deaths started after you arrived and began your digging. Synchronicity like that usually means you're in the wrong place at the wrong time." He remembered Robert Black saying something similar to him on Theta 49, after they'd found the humans there had infected the few Zanderi survivors with the Drakh plague. Black had been right.

Max looked disgusted, an expression far more suited to his features. "Coincidences happen all the time, Captain. It is just as likely that the deaths in the mining colony have been caused by something they dug up themselves. More likely in fact, as it's only their people who are dying, not mine."

*Gideon's temper, already frayed by the heat, started to unravel, and he glared back at the archeologist. "And that's just fine by you, isn't it, Max? You really don't care as long as your dig isn't affected. It doesn't bother you that people are dying, as long as they're not *your* people. Just like when we were looking for the cure. Mars was safe, so your people weren't in danger. You were just out for what profit you could make along the way." All the old antagonism flared up again. Max's attitude had angered Gideon every day they had worked together. He'd thought he'd put all that behind him when they'd found the cure, but it seemed it had been festering below the surface, ready to burst out when he and Max came together again. It seemed to be an instinctive response. Gideon and Eilerson couldn't help locking antlers every time they confronted each other.*

Eilerson stepped forward, his face like thunder, ready to respond, but before he could bark out more than a few words, Dureena moved. She slid her sinuous body between the two men, placing one of her hands on Max's chest, the other pushing Gideon away. As always, the Captain was surprised by her physical strength. For such a small person, she packed a lot of power.

Gideon couldn't see her face as she glared at Max, but her voice was full of anger, and he'd have been willing to give odds that her yellow eyes were spitting sparks at her partner.

"Stop it. You two are as bad as each other." She turned her head and glowered at Gideon. "Whatever disagreements you had in the past, move on."

The Captain couldn't help but chuckle. "This from you, Dureena? The person who's the best hater I've ever known? The person who can hold a grudge for years, without wavering?" He thought back on her behavior on Praxis 9, when she had blown out a cell door, freed a group of slaves, and almost cost them their lives in her attempts to get even.

Dureena half smiled, allowing her arms to fall to her sides. The whirling yellow of her eyes calmed as she said, "Maybe motherhood has mellowed me. It's easier to be tolerant when you're no longer alone, Captain." She turned to Max, and Gideon could hear her voice soften as she asked, "Max, please? Tell Captain what we found. Show him."

Gideon looked at the archeologist quickly, catching a flicker of annoyance on his face. He said quietly, "Confession is good for the soul, Max. Why don't you tell me?"

Max sighed and stepped back a pace, then pulled gently at his lip, obviously thinking over what had been said. After a few moments of silence, he started speaking quietly. Gideon listened as Eilerson described the findings he'd made underground in the city; findings he hadn't yet disclosed to any of his team.

He described an advanced civilization, developing technology that had taken them to the outer planets of their own solar system, where they had found a jump gate left there long in the past. They had learned

how to use the gate and sent ships to nearby systems to found colonies.

Eilerson had been pacing the floor as he talked, but now he stopped and looked over at where Gideon leaned back against the wall, his bare arms crossed. "On one of those planets they found something. They brought it back with them. Within a few years, this planet was dead, and the colonies were dying. That may have been a coincidence."

The Captain snorted softly. "I told you what I think of coincidences, Max. What did they bring back?"

Max looked him straight in the eye and lied through his teeth. "I don't know."

Gideon straightened and stepped toward the archeologist. "I don't believe you, Max. I think you're still hiding something. But by my clock it's late, and I'm tired. I'm going back up to the ship now, but I'm coming back down in twelve hours. Think about what you just told me, and be prepared to tell me the rest when I get back. Or I might just shut this whole excavation down and evacuate you all. Without any of your finds."

Ignoring Eilerson's denials and protests, Gideon swung around and headed for the corridor. Given how angry Max sounded, the Captain was glad that G'Tan was guarding his back.

Luke trudged back through the dust and heat, feeling thoroughly depressed. Having examined the dead miners in the temporary morgue that had been hastily set up to accommodate the bodies, he'd found nothing. Rather than carry out full post-mortems on site, Luke had given instructions for the bodies to be put back into the chilled containers where they'd been kept, and then to be transported up to the Excalibur. In the ship's Medbay, the doctor would have much more extensive facilities for investigation.

As Luke had left the morgue, Brennan had appeared to tell him that they'd dug up Isaac's body, and they were taking it back to the shuttle, too. The doctor sighed. He hated having to do even one post mortem. The prospect of doing five, even supported by the other doctors on his team, was depressing. Having to work through the night, at least as far as his body clock was concerned, only made it worse.

*Luke suddenly felt as if he'd been drained of energy, and it became an effort to pick his feet up and put them one in front of the other. He smiled to himself as he wondered if one of the Marines who accompanied him would give him a piggyback ride. Shaking his head, Luke dismissed the thought and distracted himself by wondering how Lily would react when told he wasn't going to be sleeping in their quarters that night. Luke decided that he wasn't quite that brave. He'd call John from the shuttle and let *him* break the bad news to Lily.*

Hearing his name called, Luke raised his head to see Gideon moving briskly toward him. Where did the Captain find the energy to move so quickly in the heat? As he came closer, Luke could see the lines of strain and tiredness etched into the Captain's face, and realized that it was all a front. Gideon was putting on a good show for the archeologists and his crew, but he was as enervated by the heat as Luke. Coming to a halt at the foot of the ramp to the shuttle, the doctor waited for the Captain to join him.

"Find anything, Doc?"

Luke shook his head and described the arrangements he'd made, pointing back along the path toward the mining colony, where a line of people was now visible, carrying five separate containers.

"They should all fit in the cargo area, and then I can work on them in Medbay."

"Nice company you keep, Luke" Gideon's words were hushed as they watched the bodies being loaded onto the shuttle.

Luke grinned and waved back at the archeologists' tent, from where they could see Max, watching their every move. "And yours was better? At least mine were quiet."

Gideon laughed softly. "Oh, Max may talk a lot, but he doesn't say much."

The doctor cocked his head to one side and looked at the Captain curiously, silently encouraging him to continue. Gideon went on, "I've given him an ultimatum. He has twelve hours to produce everything he's found down here, or I'll close him down. Now I'm going back to my cool ship, my comfortable quarters, and my hot wife, and I fully intend to spend at least ten of those hours sleeping. Let's go."

Luke groaned loudly, telling Gideon he was a cruel and heartless despot who drove his staff mercilessly, while indulging himself in pleasures of the flesh.

Gideon paused in his ascent of the ramp to look over his shoulder and grin down at the doctor. "Damned right. Move your ass, slave. Time to go to work."

20th August 2272

Excalibur - midnight

Demon was roused from her sleep as she felt the bed move beside her. She slowly opened her eyes and saw her husband standing beside the bed, holding their son in his arms. Marcus' head rested on his father's shoulder and the little boy was deeply asleep. He obviously hadn't woken when Matthew had lifted him from the bed where he'd been sleeping next to his mother, and the child's small body now rested limply against his father's chest.

When Matthew saw that Demon was awake, he smiled and asked softly, "What's he doing in here? Can't I leave you alone for a few hours without you dragging another male into your bed?"

Demon laughed quietly, and pulled herself up to kneel on the edge of the bed, lifting her hand to stroke her son's curly hair gently. "He had a nightmare. Something about Vya stealing Half-Ted from him, then taking you and me away from him, too." She quietly explained what had happened between the boys earlier, then sighed as she went on, "He was crying and scared, and he wouldn't go back to sleep in his own room, so I brought him in with me. And if you didn't go off and leave me, I wouldn't have to find someone to take your place, would I? Let that be a lesson to you. Who knows who you might find in here with me next time?"

*Raising her face to be kissed, Demon closed her eyes, savoring the taste of her husband's lips against hers. The kiss was brief and tender, and then Matthew pulled away, smiling as he whispered, "I'll just put Marcus back into his bed, then I'll come back and teach *you* a lesson in how a Captain's wife should behave when her husband comes home from a grueling mission."*

Demon chuckled softly. "Promises, promises." Then she watched her husband's ass with lustful enjoyment, as he walked out of their bedroom, carrying their son.

An hour later, she lay with her head on Matthew's shoulder, lazily sated from their lovemaking. Her husband rested his head against hers, and Demon could feel him drifting into sleep. She wondered whether to tell him that she had called for help. Deciding that it could wait until morning, Demon closed her eyes and was asleep within seconds.

Excalibur conference room - mid-morning

Gideon looked up from the datapad in front of him as the doors to the conference room swished open and Luke Raven staggered in. The doctor was still wearing Medbay scrubs and he looked exhausted. Gideon waved Luke into a chair then rose to get the jug of coffee and a mug from the ledge at the side of the room. Pouring the coffee, he pushed the mug in front of Luke and said, "It's not as good as the stuff Lily makes, but it will help you stay awake for a few more minutes."

Luke nodded gratefully and lifted the mug to his lips, drinking deeply then sitting back in his chair and gesturing with the mug at the datapad Gideon held. "Is that my preliminary report?"

Gideon nodded. "It doesn't give me much. Have you found anything more during the night? I'm sorry you had to work through, Luke, but…"

Raven interrupted before Gideon could finish his sentence. "But people are dying. I know, Matt, it's OK. But I won't deny that I'm just about ready to drop and I'm headed straight for my bed as soon as we're done." Luke yawned mightily before he said, "I haven't pulled a straight twenty-four hour shift like this since my days in ER. I'm not as young as I was then, and I need my sleep more."

Gideon took the hint and said briskly, "So what can you tell me, Doctor? How did these people die?"

Luke shook his head. "I've examined them all, taken samples, analyzed them, scanned them, damn near dissected them, and at the end of it all, I can tell you just one thing about them."

Gideon cocked his head to one side and waited while Luke took another long pull at his coffee. The doctor wiped his mouth and looked apologetically at the Captain. "The only thing those five people have in common is that they're all dead, and I'm damned if I know why. There is absolutely no reason why any of them should be dead. They have no fatal diseases, no injuries, no pathogens, no poisons, and no viruses that could kill them. Nothing. The only bacteria I could find were totally benign. If half their insides weren't sitting in containers in Medbay, they should damned well get up and walk out of there. I'm stumped, Matt. I don't have a clue."

The Captain opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so, the door opened and a familiar voice interrupted.

"Excuse me for eavesdropping, but if the good doctor here is clueless, I wonder if I could be of assistance?"

Gideon sighed. It was time for a family reunion after all. John had better go look for another fattened calf.

Luke span around in his chair at the sound of the voice behind him. It was instantly recognizable, belonging to an old friend of the Captain, who hadn't spent much time on board the Excalibur since the

cure to the Drakh plague had been found. Or more to the point, since the sisters had come on board. Why would he turn up now?

"Galen!" Luke swung back to see Gideon smile and stand, holding his hand out to the Technomage.

Galen grasped it and smiled back. "It's good to see you again, Matthew. Tell me; am I least wanted or most needed right now?"

Gideon laughed. "You're never going to let me forget that comment, are you? What brings you here? I certainly wouldn't object if you could stay awhile and help us solve the mystery we seem to have down on Cygnus 36." Waving Galen into a seat, Gideon sat, then lifted the datapad and offered it to the Technomage. "Here's a summary of what we've found so far, if you're interested."

Galen waved the datapad aside. "No need. I've been keeping abreast of developments on my way here. And I was briefed before I set out."

Luke watched in silence as Gideon raised an eyebrow. Obviously, the Captain didn't understand the comment, either.

"Briefed? Who briefed you?"

Galen leaned back in the chair, lacing his long fingers together over his long, black coat as he smiled at the Captain. "Alwyn. He couldn't come himself right now, and Sarah was occupied, so they asked me to take his place. His briefing was based on the information provided to him by your wife, Matthew. I never thought I'd see the day when the Witches of Eriadne asked for help from a Technomage, but it seems that day has come. I kept a look out for low flying pigs during my journey, but I haven't spotted any yet. Pity. A bacon sandwich would be quite welcome."

Luke looked over at Gideon, who seemed surprised by this revelation, and not best pleased. The doctor spoke before the Captain could react. "Demon called Alwyn for help? Why would she do that?"

Galen leaned forward, placing his forearms on the table in front of him. "Despite my prejudice against witches, I have to admit the one Matthew married seems to have a modicum of sense. She knows when she's out of her depth, and she knows when she needs help. Demon may not know exactly what you're up against here, Matthew, but she senses that it's something bigger and more evil than anything you've dealt with before. So she called for reinforcements."

Gideon glowered across at the Technomage. It was apparent that the Captain was angry, but the doctor wondered who the real target for that anger was. Galen, for what he'd just said? Or Demon, for having called for help without telling her husband? It was obvious that Gideon hadn't known.

Gideon grumbled. "This is nonsense. We haven't found the cause of the deaths yet, but that doesn't mean there's anything 'evil' going on here, Galen. I wish Deborah had spoken to me first. While I'm glad to have your help on this one, I don't think we should get overly dramatic. It could be something as simple as a new virus Luke hasn't seen before."

He looked over at the doctor, who shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Captain. We've screened those bodies down to a molecular level. Whatever killed them, it wasn't anything I can find. You may just need a Technomage to solve this, after all."

Gideon walked briskly toward his quarters, mentally running through the list of things he needed to do before going back down to the planet. Luke had gone back to his quarters to sleep, while Galen had gone on to Medbay, saying he would like to examine the remains before they were returned to the planet below for burial. The Captain had no idea what Galen was looking for, but couldn't see any harm in letting him do so. Gideon quirked a lip in an ironic smile, as he remembered his earlier thoughts about Technomages. [I should have known better. Think of the devil…]

He made a mental note to hide his leather jacket from marauding dragons just as his commlink sounded. Lifting it to his mouth, Gideon barked, "Gideon. Go," as he kept walking. Lieutenant Jackson advised him that Paul Brennan, the miners' leader, had just arrived in a shuttle, wanting to take the bodies back to the planet below.

Gideon agreed. "Notify Dr. Endawi that he's to release the bodies to Mr. Brennan after Galen's finished his examination. Tell Brennan that I'll meet him down on the planet later. I'll contact him. Gideon out."

As he lowered his arm, he arrived at the door to his quarters. The doors sensed his presence, identified him, and opened automatically. Entering the room, Gideon found Deborah and Marcus sitting at the dining table, eating breakfast with Angel.

Deborah looked up as he entered and smiled. "Matthew! I'm so glad you came back before you went down to the planet. There's something I must tell you."

Gideon nodded to Angel, and then tilted his head toward the door of the bedroom. He gave Angel a brief smile, asking, "Could you keep an eye on Marcus while I talk to Deborah?" Without waiting for an answer, he strode through to the bedroom, then spun on his heel and waited for his wife to join him.

She was frowning as she entered the bedroom, and her frown deepened as he carefully closed the door behind her. "What's the matter? Is something wrong? Is that why you left so early this morning without waking me? I had something I wanted to tell you, but when I woke up, you'd already gone."

Gideon took a deep breath, calming himself. He'd been containing his anger ever since he'd learned that his wife had gone behind his back to ask for help from Alwyn. Now he spoke in a low controlled voice. "What do you think would happen to a member of my crew who started second guessing me? Who went behind my back and made arrangements without my knowledge or consent?"

Deborah's face went blank. She assumed the expressionless mask she wore when she was clamping down on her feelings, not allowing herself to react. Her voice was cool and controlled, but she wasn't quite able to conceal the slight quiver of imminent tears from her first words, as she said quietly, "I think you'd throw that person off your ship. Is that what you plan to do to me, Matthew?"

She paused for a moment, giving Gideon time to think her question over. It was a good one. What exactly did he plan to do about her insubordination? Could he even call it that? Deborah wasn't a member of his crew, after all.

After a few seconds, she went on quietly, "Obviously, you know that I asked for Alwyn's help. That's what I wanted to tell you, first thing this morning. May I ask how you found out?"

Gideon stared at her. He knew Deborah was upset by his anger, despite the absence of expression on her face, but he tried not to let her distress weaken his resolve. "I know because we have a visitor…" Before he could continue, Deborah interrupted him.

"A visitor? Is Alwyn here already?" For a moment, her face flickered, and Gideon could see the pleasure the thought gave her. Deborah looked on Alwyn almost as a surrogate father, and Gideon knew his next words would disappoint her.

He shook his head. "Alwyn's busy. He sent Galen." Her face flickered again, this time with disappointment, but she remained silent as he went on, "I'm glad you planned to tell me this morning, but I would have preferred to know last night. Damn it, Deborah, I would have preferred to be consulted." His irritation crept into his voice, and he knew that by now he would be broadcasting hostility, which his wife would find difficult to handle.

Deborah's head dropped and she said quietly. "There wasn't much chance to tell you last night." Gideon knew it was true. He'd come straight back from Marcus' bedroom, thrown off his clothes, and leaped into bed, starting to make love to her before she could speak. They'd both been a little distracted after that, and when they were done, he'd fallen asleep almost at once. His annoyance started to fade, as it always did when he thought about making love to his wife.

Gideon stepped forward and lifted Deborah's chin with his fingers. As she looked up at him, he could see that her eyes were full, but she was trying hard not to cry. Running his thumb along her cheekbone, he asked quietly, "Why didn't you speak to me before you called Alwyn?"

A single tear escaped and ran down her face as she whispered, "I was scared. I can't explain it, Matthew. There's something terribly wrong, but I can't figure out what it is. It comes and goes, gets closer, then more distant, but it's bad. I keep thinking of Macbeth: 'By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes.' So I called Sarah, and asked her if she could get Alwyn to call you. She said he was off Earth, but she'd contact him. I expected Alwyn to call. I didn't expect Galen just to show up. I'm sorry."

Gideon let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding and pulled his wife into his arms. He held her tightly for a few moments, then pushed her out to arms length and tried to smile. It was difficult, as Deborah had lost control of her feelings, and she was sending ripples of unhappiness.

"Shh, stop that, or Marcus will get upset." He kissed her gently, then pulled back to look at her. Her golden brown eyes were red and puffy, and tear tracks marked her face. All Gideon wanted to do was take her to bed and comfort her, but he knew he didn't have time for that. Cursing his susceptibility to women's tears, he carefully wiped Deborah's cheeks.

"Next time you get frightened, talk to me first. Now I have to go." He turned, and had started walking toward the door when Deborah grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"You don't have your PPG. Take it with you, please. I know G'Tan will be with you, but I'd still be happier if you're armed. I'm frightened, OK. And I'm talking to you first." Deborah tried to smile, but Gideon could see her heart wasn't in it. She really was scared.

He nodded and retrieved the PPG, power cells, and holster from the security cabinet. When he had finished putting it on, he found Deborah was holding out his leather jacket. He was about to protest when she said, "Ilas tells me it gets cold at night. It's dark down there now. You may need it."

Taking the jacket from her, he pulled his wife back into his arms and gave her one last kiss, before breaking away, saying, "That's why I'll never throw you off my ship. I love the way you take care of me. I'll be back in a couple of hours." Then he left rapidly, stopping only to kiss his son and to wave at his

sister-in-law on his way out.

Angel looked up as Demon came back into the living room. She could see at once that her sister was upset. Demon's eyes were red, and she was trying to force a smile.

"Are you OK?" Angel asked quietly, wondering if Matt and Demon had been arguing.

Demon tried to smile again, but her eyes were worried as she said, "I'm fine. Just a little worried about what Ilas told us. I'll be OK."

Angel nodded, and lifted a napkin to wipe Marcus' mouth. She wasn't convinced by Demon's words, but she knew her sister well enough to leave it alone.

After a few moments silence, Demon said quietly, "Angel. There's something you should know. Galen's back."

Angel groaned. That was all she needed. A lovesick Technomage. She had done her best to be friends with Galen, but it had become increasingly difficult. He stared at her like a forlorn puppy, his unrequited passion apparent in his every glance, until it was obvious to everyone. It was embarrassing, if vaguely flattering. She sighed, "Oh hell."

Cygnus 36 - late at night

Gideon glanced around the tent that Max, Ilas, and Dureena were using as a temporary home. Max obviously believed in traveling in comfort these days. The tent was fitted out luxuriously, with colorful carpets and cushions, and had numerous internal dividers, separating off different 'rooms'. Dureena was currently sitting in the main living area, cross-legged on one of the cushions. She smiled up at the Captain, and patted the pillow next to her.

"Stop looming over me, Captain. Come and sit down here."

Gideon smiled and shook his head. "If I got down there, I'd never get up again, and anyway, I don't have time. Where's Max? I expected him to be here."

Dureena sighed, lifting herself to her feet in one smooth, sensuous motion. "He was supposed to be back by now. I'll take you to him."

She led the Captain and his escort out of the tent into the darkness. Cygnus 36 had two small moons, neither of which shed much light. The stars shone brightly overhead, twinkling through the thin atmosphere, somehow making the night feel even colder. Gideon pulled his leather jacket more tightly around him, grateful that Deborah had made him take it. At least by wearing it, he could keep it out of harms way, just in case any nesting dragons dropped by.

Following Dureena in the darkness wasn't easy. She made no sound as she wove her way through the rocks, and Gideon had to stay close to see her, aware at every moment of G'Tan's presence at his shoulder. The Narn Marine was like a huge, silent shadow in the night. The Captain realized that the only sound he could hear was that of his own boots crunching the dry rocks beneath his feet. His two companions

moved in complete silence. [How do they do that?] Gideon wondered to himself, and then dismissed the question. He'd given up asking how Dureena did a lot of things years ago. Why should he start again now?

Galen had done his usual trick of disappearing as soon as they'd landed. Despite the reconciliation between the Technomage and Dureena the previous year, Galen still seemed a little reluctant to meet the thief again. Gideon had no doubt that the Technomage would make his appearance unexpectedly, but at the most significant moment, emerging from the shadows like a deadbeat relative looking for a handout.

The Captain nearly fell over Dureena as she came to an abrupt halt in front of him. In the darkness, he could barely see her arm move as she waved some sort of signal at the wall in front of her. A wall that Gideon would have walked straight into if Dureena hadn't stopped when she did.

A thin line of bright light appeared in the wall, outlining a rectangle about a meter and a half wide by two and a half meters high.

[A doorway. Brilliant deduction, Matt. That's why they made you Captain.] Gideon smiled at his own thoughts, and then shielded his eyes as the line of light widened, and the doorway opened.

As Gideon followed Dureena into the dimly lit room, he could see Max sitting hunched over a table, completely engrossed in whatever he was studying. He was apparently oblivious to the entry of his partner, and to the Captain and his Marine Sergeant accompanying her.

Dureena crossed the room quickly and silently, moving to stand between Max and the light source illuminating his work area. The archeologist looked up, his face clearly showing his irritation.

"What do you want? I'm busy." Max's voice was full of annoyance. Gideon raised an eyebrow. He'd never heard Max use that tone to either of his partners before, and speaking like that to Dureena could seriously reduce his life expectancy. To the Captain's surprise, the little thief responded quietly and calmly.

"Max, it's late. You're late. You said you'd be back at the tent an hour ago." She reached out and gently tousled the archeologist's hair.

Eilerson's irritated expression changed to one of affection as he looked up at the Zanderi woman. He took her hand and kissed it gently, smiling up at her as he said, "I lost track of the time. When is the Captain due? I need to…"

Gideon cleared his throat from the doorway and Max spun around in his chair, his face suffused with anger and fear. "What are you doing here? How dare you…"

Dureena interrupted him, laying her hand across his mouth. "I brought them. You have to tell them, Max. You have to show them what you found. It's affecting you, changing you. Let it go."

Gideon watched as Eilerson frowned, and then shook his head, as if trying to clear it. He looked from Dureena to the Captain and back, looking puzzled and confused. There was almost a childlike quality to the way he looked up at the little thief. Gideon had never seen that expression before, and he found it profoundly unsettling. Something had happened to Eilerson, and he wanted to know what.

Max finally nodded and slowly pushed himself to his feet. "It's over here." He pulled a small device from

his pocket, pressing a number of buttons as he approached what looked like a blank wall. A crack appeared in the flat surface at waist height, then a segment of the wall lowered itself outward, forming a shelf. Eilerson leaned into the cavity that had been hidden behind and pulled a large stone chest out onto the ledge. The degree of effort it took showed that the chest was heavy.

Gideon moved over to join the archeologist, examining the chest closely. It was a plain box, cut from a chalk colored stone, rectangular, about half a meter in length and a third of a meter in height and depth. The lid overhung the sides by a couple of centimeters, and Gideon was reaching out to lift it when a voice shouted from behind him.

"Do not touch that thing! It's an abomination!"

Gideon spun around to see Galen striding across the room, his hood over his head, brandishing his staff before him like a weapon. He pointed the staff at the chest and muttered words in a language Gideon didn't know.

A keening, whining noise from behind him made the Captain spin back to look at the chest again. All around the lid an eerie yellow light glowed through the tiny gap. Gideon recognized the color instantly. A shudder of horror and disgust ran through his body as bad memories came flooding back. He looked up at Max, who was watching him and Galen, appearing confused again.

Gideon whispered softly, "Oh fuck. What in hell are you doing with an Apocalypse Box, Max?"

Excalibur - early afternoon

Commander John Matheson was sitting in the Captain's chair on the bridge, reading reports, when a shiver ran through him. He felt as if someone had walked over his grave. John closed his eyes, trying to work out what had caused his reaction. He widened his telepathic senses to scan the ship lightly. Nothing as intrusive as picking up individuals' thoughts and feelings, but enough to detect any variation in the general 'feel' of the crew.

Nothing. Whatever had caused his reaction was either not on the ship, or it had come and gone again.

John shrugged and went back to his reading.

Cygnus 36 - late at night

Max sat with his head in his hands, while Galen loomed over him, berating him for his stupidity. Gideon had never thought he'd see a scene like this one. The Max Eilerson he knew would never have allowed Galen to browbeat him in that way. He'd have stood up to the Technomage, sneering and swapping insult for insult, defying Galen to do his worst. Max would rather have been burned to a cinder by one of Galen's fireballs than allow the Technomage to bully him.

The Captain stepped forward and pulled on Galen's arm. "Leave it. There's no point going on about what a stupid thing Max has done. I suspect he knows that. The question is what do we do now? Do we have any idea what's in that Box?"

Galen glared, shifting his staff into one hand, while he pulled his hood back. His eyes glittered with fury as he rounded on Gideon. "The question is not what *is* in the Box, but what *was* in it. If Maximilian was foolish enough to open that Box without proper barriers in place, whatever it contained is probably now loose, and you have your explanation for the deaths that have occurred on this planet."

Max leaped to his feet, protesting that he'd never opened the chest. He'd been studying it and the artifacts found with it, and hadn't yet started his investigations into the contents.

Galen raised his staff again, his fingers shifting to various points along its length. A stream of red light emerged from the tip, writhing and twisting as it wound its way around the Box. Gradually, the red light tightened its coils until it enclosed the Box in a cage of fire. The yellow light that had seeped through the crack under the lid faded and died.

The Technomage sighed. "Whatever was in there has gone. It must have been strong enough to overcome the barriers built into the Box itself." He glared at Dureena, who had been watching silently as events had unfolded. "Describe the place where you found it."

Dureena gave a detailed description of the room in which the Box had been stored, and the plinth from which they had taken it. Galen sighed again. "There must have been more controls built into the room. Controls that you breached when you removed it. Whatever was inside has escaped and can now wreak havoc on us all."

A silence fell as they all looked at Max. He was still looked badly shaken by what he was hearing. Gideon decided he needed more information before he could choose what action to take.

"Galen, I don't understand. The Box I carried around held Lucas Buck's spirit prisoner inside it for centuries. He was only able to get out and take over because of Angel's 'spell'. Is this Box different? Weaker somehow?"

Max gazed sharply and questioningly at Gideon, who realized that until that moment Eilerson hadn't known about his ownership of the Apocalypse Box. Max knew that when they had first visited Eriadne, Gideon had been taken over by the spirit of his ancestor, Lucas Buck, but he hadn't known the source of that spirit. He hadn't known about the Box. Which must mean that Dureena and Ilas, who had both known about it, had never told him.

[Interesting,] thought the Captain, while listening to Galen's response to his question.

The Technomage shook his head again. "It is not the Box that is weaker, but the inhabitant that is stronger. Lucas Buck was neither old nor powerful as a spirit. Given time—millennia—he would have overcome the entrapment of your Box by himself, but he was still a relatively new captive. Whatever this Box contained must have been much older and much stronger."

Max said softly, "It was at least 10,000 years old. That's how long ago this civilization died. It can't have been a coincidence." Gideon was pleased to hear that Eilerson had finally come around to his point of view on the subject of coincidences.

Galen waved his staff at the Box again, and the cage of fire unwound itself, flowing back into the tip, until it had disappeared completely. "It must have escaped before, done its work, then somehow been recaptured, and confined here. Until some idiot came along and released it." He glared at the archeologist again, provoking Max into another outburst of protests.

Gideon stepped between them, aware that GTan, who had stood in the entrance silently observing everything, had raised his PPG rifle. Just in case. "I said leave it." He glowered at the combatants who each took a step backwards. GTan lowered his rifle again. The Captain turned to Galen, asking, "What form would it take, Galen? Lucas Buck needed a body to work through. Mine. If this thing is more powerful, can it work without a body? How do we track it down? How do we stop it before it kills again?"

Galen gave Max another sharp look, and then said quietly, "It will need a body. It will have taken over the body of someone nearby when it escaped, banishing that person's spirit into the Box, just as Lucas did to you, Matthew."

Gideon shivered again. He still had nightmares about the time he had spent with his soul confined inside the Box, drifting in eternal grayness, sometimes aware of the passage of time, of events happening in the outside world, but most of the time feeling lost and adrift in space and time. It had been far too reminiscent of when he had hung alone in space, waiting to die, after the destruction of the Cerberus.

Galen went on, "It needs the body to feed. It will continue to attack its victims, draining them of life force and energy, until it is ready to move on, and to find a suitable means of transport."

The Captain shook himself free of the disturbing memories. He asked the obvious question. "So who's carrying it? Who's been infected by it?" Gideon turned to Max and Dureena. "Who came close to the Box? Did you bring it directly here?"

Dureena shook her head. "We took it back to the tent first, because Max wanted to take pictures, and his holocamera was there. Then we brought it here, and no one else has had access to this room since. Not even Ilas."

Gideon was relieved. At least that cut down the possibilities. Unless... "Did you meet anyone while you were carrying it here?"

Dureena shook her head, and Gideon was about to heave a sigh of relief when she added, "No, but Brennan was waiting for us when we got back to the tent. We hid the chest, and got rid of him as soon as we could. Then we brought it on here. No one else has been near it since."

A prolonged silence followed while they each drew the same conclusions. Galen gazed over at Max and Dureena, and his meaning was clear. A tension filled the room, which was only dispelled when Gideon turned to GTan, and quietly ordered the Narn Marine to escort the archeologist and the thief back to their tent, and hold them there. Max protested, but Dureena took his arm, saying softly, "Come on, Max. We'll talk about this back at the tent."

When he and the Captain were alone, Galen said softly, "There's a way we can find out who has been possessed. A telepathic scan should identify discrepancies in the mental field of the person who has been taken over." The Technomage turned to look at Gideon, raising one eyebrow in silent query.

The Captain groaned softly. He hated asking John to do scans, especially when it might involve danger to his First Officer. He had no doubt that scanning the person carrying the spirit that had escaped from the Box would be hazardous. "Who do we ask John to scan? Who could have been exposed to it? We can't ask him to scan every member of the IPX team *and* all people in the mining colony."

Galen shook his head. "That should not be necessary. When the Box was removed from the controlled

room where Mr. Eilerson found it, it would have taken only a short time for the captive spirit to break down the Box's remaining barriers. It would then have taken over the nearest person suitable to its needs. Commander Matheson only needs to scan those people who were in close proximity to the box within six hours of it being transported."

The Captain looked across at Galen. "Then it looks as if we've narrowed the field right down. Whatever escaped from the Box is now occupying one of four people. Dureena, Eilerson, Ilas or Brennan. What worries me is that all four of them have been up on the Excalibur and Ilas is up there now." Gideon gritted his teeth and swore softly to himself. Promising retribution to the absent archeologist he said, "Max, if you've brought some spirit from hell onto my ship, I'll…" Unable to think of a strong enough threat, the Captain paused. A shark like grin spread across his face as he finished, "I'll set Deborah onto you."

Excalibur - late afternoon

The doors between the landing bay and the corridor outside opened, allowing Deborah and John to step through, halting Gideon as he strode toward the exit. Deborah's face was frozen into the expressionless mask she always wore when she was suppressing her emotions. She stepped forward and reached out her hand toward her husband. He smiled and took it, pulling her into a warm embrace. Immediately, Gideon felt her relax and sigh as she lowered her head to his shoulder and hugged him tightly. Small ripples of relief washed through him as Deborah lost control. He heard her whisper, "I'm so glad you're back. I was frightened for you."

Gideon looked over his wife's head at John Matheson, who stood silently waiting, his face as expressionless as Deborah's had been. Something must have happened. "What it is, John?" Gideon knew it was something bad.

John took a deep breath, and then said formally, "We found Crewman Takeshiba's body in one of the access tubes, Captain. He's been dead for some time. Dr. Raven has estimated the time of death to be approximately when you left to go down to the planet. The cause is unknown." John's stance and tone relaxed a little as he went on, "Luke says Takeshiba is just like the others. It looks like whatever has been killing the miners has moved up here."

Gideon's stomach churned. Another life lost because he'd been too slow. Not smart enough to figure out what was going on, not strong enough to protect his people. A wave of guilt swept through him, and his wife looked up sharply, pleading, "Don't! Please don't, Matthew. It's not your fault."

The Captain kissed the top of Deborah's head, whispering, "I'm OK. We'll talk about it later." He then pushed her away gently, turned and signaled to G'Tan. The Narn stepped forward, his rifle raised and aimed at Max and Dureena, who were walking down the ramp from the shuttle.

The Captain raised his voice so that Max and Dureena could hear him. He wanted to be sure that they understood what he had to do. "Sergeant G'Tan, would you please escort Mr. Eilerson and Dureena Nafeel to the brig? They should be confined there pending completion of our investigation." Drawing his PPG from its holster, Gideon aimed it at the couple, saying quietly, "You understand why I have to do this? Until we can clear you, I have to safeguard my people and my ship."

Gideon felt uncomfortable about aiming a weapon at his old shipmates, but he told himself that one of them might not be such an old friend after all. Old, maybe. Friendly, definitely not. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw G'Tan speaking softly into his commlink, while the Narn never let his gun waiver from the

couple.

Max looked rebellious and started to protest, but Dureena nodded and pulled on her partner's arm. "Come on, Max. It won't be for long." They started to move toward the door, but Gideon waved them to a halt with his PPG.

"Stay here until G'Tan gets some backup. A couple of his people will be here in a minute. I don't want any possibility of this thing getting loose in my ship."

Dureena nodded again, and the subsequent silence lengthened as they waited for more Marines to arrive. Gideon knew from the way she was looking at him that Deborah desperately wanted to hold him and touch him again. John wanted to find out what his Captain had meant about clearing Max and Dureena, but neither moved, knowing that they must not distract Gideon while he and G'Tan stood guard on the archeologist and the thief. The wait was long enough for the Captain's mind to race through all the things he should have done to save his crewman's life, to prevent the creature running loose and killing on his ship. He didn't dare look directly at his wife, as he knew she would be picking up on all his guilt, and suffering with him.

Gideon knew that Max was the most likely candidate in their search for the killer. He had been in the right places at the right times, and his behavior had become uncharacteristic for the acerbic archeologist. The phrase 'he's not himself' could hold a very literal meaning for Max. Dureena was a less likely culprit, but she too was showing signs of unusual behavior. Her calmness and acceptance of her impending imprisonment was totally unlike the Dureena Gideon knew so well. He tried to tell himself that she was just worried about her partner, and if she had been taken over, she would never have looked so concerned, been so tense, or led him to the Box in the way she had.

Within a few minutes, the doors opened again and five of G'Tan's Marines, all fully armed, entered the landing bay. Gideon holstered his gun as the Marines left, taking Max and Dureena with them. Then he turned to Deborah and opened his arms. She flung herself at him and held him tightly, whispering, "When John told us about Takeshiba, I was frightened that whoever had killed him had gone back down with you, and nearly as frightened that they hadn't. Lily, Ilas, and Angel are with the children in our quarters, guarding them."

Gideon swore softly to himself, then pushed Deborah back a little, to look at her and then over at John. "I'm really sorry, but that's not a good idea. We need to get Ilas out of there, now. We're going to have to take her to join Max and Dureena in the brig. It's not very likely, but she may be the one infected."

Deborah and John both looked shocked. Gideon had waited until his return to the Excalibur to brief his First Officer, not wanting to give details of his findings over an open comm. channel from the shuttle. He now regretted that decision. It may have exposed his family to danger. Gideon quickly explained what had happened below, and how Galen would be joining them again shortly.

"He's taking the Box back to the room where Max found it. He says it's shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted, but it will be safer there than anywhere else." Gideon turned to John and quietly explained what they needed him to do. "I'm sorry, John, but scanning the people who might have been taken over is the only way. Will you do it?"

John closed his eyes, and Gideon knew that the idea of scanning for the monster that inhabited one of their friends was intensely distasteful to the younger man. After a moment's silent meditation, John opened his eyes again and nodded. "Of course, I'll do whatever is necessary to track this thing down."

Gideon said quietly, but with as much sincerity as he could inject into his voice, "Thank you, John. Galen says he can instruct you on what to look out for when he gets back up here. In the meantime, we need to secure Ilas, just in case she isn't who we think she is."

John nodded, but Deborah's shock showed clearly on her face as she said hurriedly, "Matthew, it can't be Ilas. I'd know. I'd sense it through our link."

Gideon smiled at her sadly, raising his thumb to stroke her cheekbone. "Are you sure? Your link to Ilas is almost non-existent these days. She can only send to you when you actually touch her. Have you done that since she came on board? Have you had any mental contact?"

Deborah shook her head reluctantly. "No, but Ilas was the one who told us about Max's find. She was really scared by it. Surely she wouldn't have done that if…"

Gideon interrupted. "We need to be sure. I agree it's unlikely, but it could be a double bluff of some kind. For Ilas' own safety as much as for the rest of us, we need to keep her under guard until we can check. The thing that has murdered all those people could have taken over her body, banishing the real Ilas to the confines of the Box. If this thing has taken over Ilas' body, then it's not your sister who's looking after Marcus right now."

Deborah paled, then nodded reluctantly and stood quietly, listening as Gideon raised his commlink, and called G'Tan. The Marine Sergeant confirmed that Max and Dureena were now confined to separate quarters within the brig. The Captain gave terse instructions for the Marines to go to his quarters and place Ilas under guard. He knew that G'Tan would take all the necessary precautions, as the Narn was fully aware of Ilas' shape-shifting abilities.

Having stood in silence, listening to the orders Gideon had given, John said quietly, "That means we'll have three of your four suspects confined. What about the last one? Brennan certainly had the opportunity to kill Takeshiba before he went back down earlier. He was in the landing bay area while they were loading the bodies, but he could easily have slipped out for a few moments while everyone was occupied. Did you put him in custody before you came back up?"

Gideon shook his head. "We couldn't find him. I decided to get back up here and ask you to scan Max, Ilas, and Dureena. With any luck, they'll be clear, then we'll know that it's Brennan. I'll take a squad of Marines back down with me and we'll do whatever is necess..."

The sound of a warning klaxon interrupted him, indicating that they needed to evacuate the landing bay, ready for decompression. A ship was coming in to land. Gideon led John and Deborah out through the door, saying, "That'll be Galen. Once he's joined us, we can check that G'Tan has managed to get Ilas secured safely. Then it will be John's turn to go to work."

Gideon acknowledged G'Tan's salute as he walked into the brig area of the Excalibur. It wasn't very large, but incorporated an open central area, with two cells on either side and one behind. Each cell had a sealed door, with internal security cameras, which sent images onto the screens of the central control station. A guard sat monitoring those screens at all times when the cells held prisoners. Fortunately, that didn't happen very often. The Excalibur was a happy ship with a contented crew, and it was rarely necessary to confine anyone to the brig. Gideon preferred more constructive forms of discipline, when required. It was the best way of keeping the bullet car tubes clean, anyway.

One of G'Tan's Marines was acting as central guard, watching the screens in front of her keenly, while the Marine Sergeant stood behind her, his PPG rifle resting over his shoulder, but ready for instant action. More of the Narn Marines stood outside three of the cell doors.

Gideon moved to the control station and looked at the screens. Three were showing live images. The Captain could see that two more Narn Marines stood inside each cell, guarding the prisoner inside. He smiled quietly to himself. G'Tan was taking his secondary role as Chief of Security very seriously.

A movement behind him alerted Gideon to John Matheson's presence at his shoulder. The First Officer said softly, "Excellent job, Sergeant G'Tan. Have any of the prisoners said or done anything of interest?"

G'Tan puffed his chest out slightly at the compliment, and then shook his head. "Nothing. Ms. Ilas came along quietly when we explained that her partners were here, and we needed to ensure that none of them had been infected. Her sisters didn't seem too happy, but they told her they'd take care of the children, and that she'd soon be back with them."

The Narn looked at Gideon and raised an eyebrow in question. Gideon grimaced as he said, "I hope they were right. Deborah's gone to explain to Lily and Angel what's happened, and to help them look after the kids. Let's start with Ilas, then she can get back to her sisters and maybe I won't have to sleep on the couch tonight."

G'Tan chuckled quietly, and gestured to the cell at the rear of the brig. The guard on the central station pressed a control, and an alarm sounded, to warn the Marines standing guard over the shape-shifter that the cell door was about to open. The Narn outside the door moved to one side, and pressed another control. The door swung open, and Gideon and his First Officer entered the cell.

Ilas looked up from the bunk where she had been sitting, waiting quite patiently, and she smiled at the Captain. He couldn't help but smile back. Ilas looked so young and childlike, with her pale face, dark violet eyes, and luminous blue hair. He remembered Deborah telling him that Ilas' favorite color was blue. It showed in her choice of the midnight blue, embroidered velvet vest she wore over a loose white shirt with wide sleeves, tucked into skin-tight black pants. Ilas somehow looked both exotic and enticing, while at the same time she appeared innocent and naïve. It was hard for Gideon to remember that this was a mature woman, a mother and a wife.

She was also probably one of the most dangerous individuals he had ever encountered. Ilas could shift from that harmless, beautiful woman who sat looking up at him so guilelessly, into a raving beast, all teeth and fangs, in seconds.

Ilas looked from Gideon to John, and her smile changed. No longer innocent, it became seductive. "Hello, John. I hear you're going to make sure I'm really me. Maybe we can find a kitchen sink later, and really prove the point."

Gideon looked across at his First Officer, and was startled to see him blush. He decided that he'd get to the bottom of that particular comment later, as it was something that John would obviously prefer he didn't know about. Ammunition for teasing his XO was always welcome. It might stop John saying 'turnips' quite so often.

John cleared his throat and said quietly. "Galen has told me what to look for. He stayed outside, as he didn't want his presence to distract you."

Matheson was being tactful. He'd actually asked the Technomage to stay outside, telling him that any residual resentment Ilas, Dureena, and Max felt toward him could make the scanning process more difficult. Even though Dureena and her partners had forgiven Galen when their daughter was born, his helping the murderer of their first child was something they could never forget.

Ilas smiled sweetly. "Thank you, John. Go ahead, do what you need to."

She closed her eyes as John stepped toward her. The two Marines raised their PPG's and pointed them directly at the shape-shifter, as John reached out and gently placed his fingers on her temples. There was total silence for a moment, and then the telepath stepped back, smiling.

"She's clear. This is Ilas."

The simultaneous sighs of every person in the room sounded like a soft breeze blowing from the air vents. Ilas rose gracefully from the bunk and moved to take Gideon's hand, towing him gently toward the door.

"Let's go and do the others, Captain. Then I can get back to my sisters and children."

"So it's Brennan." Gideon looked across the conference table, first at his First Officer, and then at Galen, who sat opposite him. "Now we know who it is, what do we do about it?"

The Captain was hugely relieved that the scans of Max and Dureena had cleared them. Neither had been taken over by the occupant of the Box, although John had quietly told Gideon on their way back to the conference room that Max was showing signs of emotional and psychic damage. Whatever had been inside the Box had been playing games with Max's head, and it had left its mark. Fortunately, John had been able to reassure Gideon that the damage wasn't permanent. It would heal once the malign influence causing it was removed.

Gideon made a mental note to warn Deborah about what had happened to Max, and ask her to speak to Ilas and Dureena. John hadn't been able to detect any damage to the two women from his surface scan, but it wouldn't do any harm for them to have a thorough check to make sure they hadn't been affected.

The mental damage Max had suffered gave Gideon one more reason for needing to capture or kill the murderer. In a way, it was poetic justice that Max Eilerson's head was being played with, after all the mind games he'd inflicted on Gideon during the Quest. However, Gideon decided it was completely unfair that the person fucking with Max's head wasn't him. He pushed the thought to one side and turned to Galen, asking, "Is there any way to kill the thing inhabiting Brennan's body without killing him? Can we get it out and back into the Box, releasing Brennan? Like you did for me."

Galen nodded. "It will be difficult and dangerous, as it was with you. But just as then, I cannot do this alone. This is a much more powerful spirit than Lucas Buck. If Alwyn were available, he could probably provide me with the assistance I need, but I have no way to contact him, and we can't wait until he reappears." Before Gideon could react, he went on hurriedly, "I will need the cooperation and support of the witches. We will have to join our powers if we are to save Mr. Brennan and banish the spirit back to the Box."

Gideon had risen from his seat as Galen spoke, and now banged the table loudly. "Absolutely not! I will not have my wife's life put in danger again! Kesani was bad enough, and after Stryvsteptix, I swore that

*I would never allow Deborah and her sisters to endanger themselves again. Find another way, Galen. Using the sisters' powers is *not* an option. If you need another Technomage, then summon Paedrig. He's dead already."*

Galen sighed deeply, and leaned forward across the table. His eyes were sad and understanding as he looked at Gideon then at John, who was looking equally stubborn. The Captain knew that John would be just as unhappy about the Technomage's proposal as he was.

*Galen spoke softly, his voice low and sad. "Matthew, there *is* no other way. Alone, I do not have the power to force that spirit out of Brennan's body. And even if you kill Brennan, I do not have the strength to stop the spirit shifting into another person. While Brennan is alive, it cannot leave his body, not until it has gained more life force, which it obtains every time it kills. But if you kill the body it inhabits, the spirit will move on. It will find another victim. And if you kill that body, it will move again, and again, and again, until you are forced to kill every person on that planet to prevent its escape. Then you will have to destroy the Box and the planet itself, to ensure that no one ever falls victim to the evil again. I do not think *you* have the power to do that, even with the full might of the Excalibur at your disposal."*

Gideon sat back in his chair, feeling nauseous. He could never bring himself to kill one man in cold blood, never mind slaughter hundreds of people, to prevent the evil escaping. He silently cursed Max Eilerson and all his ancestors, for putting him in this impossible position. Max was now, yet again, at the very top of Gideon's list of candidates for retrospective birth control. He gave silent thanks to himself that at least the Excalibur was safe. The creature was confined inside Brennan down on the planet below, and didn't yet have the power to jump bodies, unlike the time when his ship had been invaded by a creature that multiplied and spread by a simple touch.

Galen broke the long silence that had hung over the room since his last speech. "We cannot procrastinate, Matthew. The thing fed again earlier today, but its feeding is accelerating. It could kill again at any time. We must do what is necessary to confine or destroy it, and we must do it quickly."

Gideon looked across at John. The telepath's eyes were closed, but he opened them a moment later, his face full of fear and sorrow as he said quietly, "We have to ask them, Matthew. They can always refuse, but we can't take that decision on their behalf."

The Captain sighed deeply. He knew John was right; he just didn't want to admit it. Looking across at Galen, he almost pleaded, "Are you sure there's no other way?"

Galen shook his head, his expression one of compassion. "A full convocation of Technomages might achieve the same end, but even if they were willing to help, it would take weeks to get them assembled. We do not have that much time. We have hours, not days or weeks, in which to act."

Gideon took a deep breath and turned in his chair, touching a control on the panel behind him. A few seconds later, the screen above the panel lit up, and Deborah's face smiled out at him. Her deep, husky voice spoke softly.

"Hello, Matthew. Can I do something for you?"

Gazing up at her image, Gideon was almost overwhelmed by the feelings that rushed through him. He loved this woman more than he'd ever dreamed he could love anyone. How could he ask her to risk her life again? But if he didn't, hundreds of people could die.

Smiling back, Gideon said, "Actually, there is. Could you drop the children off at the crèche and join me in the conference room? Bring Angel, Ilas, and Lily with you. We need your help."

Deborah sat listening intently as Gideon explained what they needed. She clasped Ilas' left hand lightly in her right, while Angel sat on Deborah's left and Lily to Ilas' right. John sat next to Lily, listening with equal intensity. Of the four witches, only Deborah had her eyes open. The others sat with eyes closed, linked to their oldest sister, who as in the past, acted as channel and spokesperson for them all. Gideon still wasn't quite sure how it all worked. His wife had once tried to explain it to him, telling him that they weren't merged into the single unit they became when they fought. This was a less concentrated linking. It brought their minds together, but they each retained their own unique personality, and they spoke with a single voice. Deborah's voice. That voice spoke now.

"Of course we'll help, Matthew." Deborah smiled at him and Gideon knew that her next words were hers alone, as she reached across and cupped his face in her hand. "You never doubted that we would, did you? You just hoped we might refuse."

Gideon lifted his hand to take hers, turning his head to plant a kiss in her palm, and then squeezing her hand as he smiled at her sadly. "You know me too well. I hate this. I hate you all endangering yourselves in any way, for any reason."

Galen's voice drew the Captain's attention back to the Technomage. He spoke softly, his voice filled with apparently genuine regret. "I wish there were another way, Matthew. But there isn't. We either do this now, or you will have to level that colony and the IPX expedition, turning the power of your main gun on those sites, glassing them over, and killing everyone on the planet."

Deborah inhaled sharply, but it sounded more like Lily's voice that whispered, "No! Not that. There are children in the mining colony. We must save the children." Deborah's tone changed subtly, and her smile became more mischievous. "The Captain just doesn't want to admit that his main gun can't solve every problem." He had no doubt who was behind that sentence. It was unmistakably Angel.

Gideon glanced at the raven-haired witch, who sat quietly between him and her sister, with her eyes still closed, but with a naughty smile playing around her lips. He couldn't resist teasing back. "There's a time and a place for me to use my main gun, Angel. This isn't one of them."

Angel's smile turned into a pout of disappointment, and then she opened her eyes, flashing crystal blue fire at the Captain as she batted her long dark eyelashes at him. Gideon half laughed and then sobered, very much aware that Galen was watching the exchange between them closely. He knew how the Technomage felt about Angel, but also knew that Galen stood no chance with the beautiful young woman. The Captain tried to suppress the illicit pleasure that thought gave him as he returned to business.

"OK, here's the plan. Galen, G'Tan, and I will accompany the sisters down to the planet, while Max and Dureena stay here with the children. G'Tan and I will find Brennan and keep him occupied while the rest of you set up your 'spell' or whatever it is you do. Galen tells me that you can whip up something that will attract the thing inside Brennan back to the Box. Is that correct?"

He looked from Lily to Angel and back. Those two were the true 'witches' of the foursome. They were the ones who dabbled in 'spells' and 'magic'. Gideon still couldn't understand exactly what they did, but he'd learned to accept it and make use of it, rather than challenging it. He just wished they could do whatever they did without Deborah, but it seemed they needed her strength and direction.

[They're not alone. I need her, too. God help me if this goes wrong.] Gideon looked across at his wife, no longer linked to her sisters. She smiled back at him and the Captain knew that she knew precisely what he was feeling.

Lily nodded, her emerald green eyes open and serious as she said, "Yes, we can do that. The spirit will be irresistibly drawn to the enchantment we can weave. And where the spirit moves, the body will have to follow."

Gideon nodded. "G'Tan and I will follow Brennan, and we'll be ready to bring him down if he shows any sign of breaking free of whatever it is you do." He was about to continue when John interrupted.

"I would like to join you down on the planet, Captain." He spoke very formally. "My presence may be beneficial, as I could block any telepathic attack the creature may make."

The Captain shook his head sadly. "Lily can do that, John, and I need you up here. I need you to do something that I don't think I could do myself if I stayed behind. It's probably the most difficult order I've ever given you." Gideon took a deep breath before saying quietly. "If after an hour you haven't received a call in which at least two of us independently verify that the operation has been a success, then you must assume that the creature is loose. If that happens, I need you to turn the main gun on the planet and kill everyone down there. Including Lily, her sisters, and me."

The silence that followed his words was fraught with shock as the others in the conference room took in what he had said. John closed his eyes, swallowed, and then opened them again to stare at his Captain and friend.

"Captain…Matthew, please. Don't ask me to do that. I don't think I…I'm not sure…Oh God, not that. Don't ask me to do that." John's eyes were full of anguish and pain as he stared at his Captain, his hand having moved almost involuntarily to grasp Lily's, where it lay on the table next to his, squeezing it tightly.

Before Gideon could speak, Lily turned to her partner, her emerald eyes full of tears as she whispered, "You must, John. You must promise to do this. If the creature breaks loose, it could take my body and banish my spirit to the Box. Don't let that happen to me, please, John. I'd rather be dead."

John pulled Lily into his arms, touching his forehead to hers. Whatever silent exchange flowed between their minds seemed to give the First Officer the courage and strength he needed. After a few seconds, he straightened, opened his eyes and looked across at his Captain. "Yes, Sir. Orders received and understood. You'd better make sure it doesn't come to that though, or somehow I'm going to hunt down your ghost and make your afterlife a living hell."

Gideon laughed. "I promise I'll do my best, as I'm sure Galen and the ladies will, too." He stood and moved around the table to stand between Angel and Deborah, taking each of their hands in his as they rose. "Now let's get down to the landing bay and get this show on the road. Galen, lead the way."

Sitting on the shuttle on the way down to the planet, her eyes lowered to look at her own feet, Angel asked herself why she was doing this. Ever since Matt had told them that Max had found an Apocalypse Box, she had been feeling nauseous. The memories that had assailed her were overwhelming, memories of how Lucas had first escaped from the Box, then how she had helped her sisters and Galen imprison him,

freeing Matt. Of how his spirit had seduced her into releasing him again, a seduction that had cost the life of Dureena's first child.

Angel never wanted to see or hear about an Apocalypse Box again. She wanted nothing to do with recapturing the evil spirit that had escaped Max's Box. She wanted to run back to her quarters, pull her bed covers over her head, and not come out until it was all over. But here she was, sitting on the shuttle, feeling sick with apprehension and fear of what lay ahead.

A gentle mental caress soothed and calmed her. The deep, sympathetic voice of her older sister sounded softly inside her head. Demon sent, [I know this is hard for you, Angel. I admire you so much for being brave enough to help. This is so much worse for you than it is for the rest of us. I wish there were something I could do to help.]

Angel glanced up at her sister, sitting in the seat opposite, her face filled with sorrow and sympathy. The younger witch briefly wondered if Demon had tried to reassure Ilas and Lily in the same way. Angel tried to smile as she sent, [You already helped a lot. Thanks for understanding. Now do what you can to help the others.] She sent a mental hug to Demon, suppressing the jealousy she felt when she saw that Gideon was holding her sister's hand tightly as they sat next to each other.

Memories of how it had felt when Lucas had held her hand like that almost overturned Angel's resolution, and she closed her eyes, trying to push away the pain that followed. Trying to divert her thoughts, Angel told herself that at least Galen was sitting at the far end of the row of seats from her, where she couldn't see him mooning over her.

[Be thankful for small mercies, Angel-girl. That might be the last bit of good news you get today.]

Straightening in her seat, and lifting her head, Angel smiled across at her sister and the Captain, putting on her very bravest face.

Cygnus 36 - dawn

Creeping silently in the half-light of dawn, the creature followed the four sisters and the Technomage as they made their way to the room where it had been imprisoned for so long. It knew what they planned to do, and it knew they would fail.

The creature smiled, secure inside the body it had taken over when it first escaped from the Box. It was a good body and had served it well. Soon, the creature knew it would have accumulated enough life force to switch to another body, and it knew exactly which one it wanted.

Once it had sucked the life force from the Technomage and three of the sisters, it would move into the body of the female shape-shifter. She had a strong body, much stronger than the one it now inhabited.

The creature sniffed the air and pondered on what to do next. Should it attack the Captain and the Narn first, sucking them dry as hors d'oeuvres? Or should it save itself for the main course of the witches and the Technomage? Decisions, decisions.

Making up its mind, the creature scuttled into the maze of sand dunes and rocks.

Gideon watched his wife and her sisters disappearing into the labyrinth of ruins with the Technomage, then turned to G'Tan and said, "Let's go find Brennan. It will take them a while to get to the room where the Box is being held, then to set up the 'spell' or whatever the hell it is they do. We need to make sure Brennan doesn't get to them before they're ready."

G'Tan nodded and waved his arm at the path leading to the mining colony, indicating that the Captain should lead the way. Gideon grinned up at the huge Narn Marine. "Always watching my back, eh?"

The Narn grinned back. "Always. If I let anything happen to you, Demon would come looking for me, and she *really* scares me." Gideon laughed, and the big Marine raised an eyebrow before going on, "Have you seen her working out with my Marines? She's damned fast, and I made the mistake of showing her and her sisters how to castrate the males of every species in the ISA, and a few others, too. I really *don't* want your wife pissed with me."

Gideon chuckled and led the way down the path, saying, "You've only got yourself to blame then, haven't you? Whatever made you show the sisters how to do that? They were dangerous enough with knives without becoming experts in castration."

Working their way through the piles of rock and sand under the increasing heat of the rising sun, Gideon listened as G'Tan chuckled and told him about the encounter with one of the Joneses in the gym on the Excalibur. By the time they emerged into the main street of the colony, G'Tan had just got to Deborah's line about 'fucking a porcupine' and Gideon was laughing again, as the Narn explained that he'd had to look up the reference afterwards.

Glancing back at G'Tan, Gideon saw a puzzled expression on the Marine Sergeant's face as he said, "I'm still trying to decide why anyone would *want* to fuck a porcupine. They are not particularly attractive creatures."

Gideon decided that he'd explain the joke later, as he saw Brennan emerging from one of the buildings ahead of them, waving to the Captain and the Marine to join him.

"OK, time to get serious. Stay alert. There's no way of telling how he'll react once the 'spell' starts working."

Demon worked carefully on the spell she was writing in one triangular corner of the pentagram, chewing her lip in concentration. This had to be done exactly right. There was no room for errors. Her back ached from the crouching position she'd assumed to write on the floor, and the chill in the room made her shiver.

Taking a brief break to stretch her back, Demon glanced around. It was large room with a ceiling so high it was lost in gloom. The lighting was dim and reddish, as if the energy storage devices that had lasted so many thousands of years were nearly drained. Galen had set balls of fire hovering in strategic positions around the room, shedding sufficient light to make possible the delicate work in which he and the witches were engaged.

Demon glanced at the Technomage, hunched in his long black coat, writing slowly and carefully in his own triangle. Much as she normally disliked the man, Demon had to admit that he had been generous to the sisters on this visit. He had insisted that he should take the most vulnerable position on the pentagram, taking responsibility for creating the force field that would protect the sisters from physical

attack.

Riding down in the shuttle, they had gone over the plan, agreeing the roles each participant in the spell would take. Demon had felt her husband's relief when Galen had insisted on taking the most hazardous role. The tall blonde had only accepted the plan when the Technomage had agreed to take his place on the far side of the pentagram from the entrance to the room, where he would be least open to attack. She had smiled, saying quietly, "We can't afford for anything to happen to you, Galen. If you let that force field down, we're all vulnerable. Let us try to protect you, while you protect us."

Galen had given her a genuine smile as he'd agreed, before his eyes had drifted to Angel again. He hadn't been able to see her easily from where he'd sat, but he'd leaned forward in his seat and peered around Ilas, who sat between them. Fortunately, Angel had had her eyes closed at that point and hadn't seen the expression on Galen's face when he'd looked longingly at her. Demon had sighed to herself, wishing the Technomage would get over his obsession with her sister.

They had then discussed the 'spell' that Lily and Angel would initiate through the merge of the sisters' minds, which would draw the creature irresistibly back to the Box. It was similar to the spell they had used on Lucas Buck when he had taken over Matthew's body, but Galen had made suggestions for subtle changes that would strengthen it. Demon had felt Matthew's hand squeeze hers tightly as they'd talked about that time. She knew her husband hated to be reminded of when Lucas had thrown him out of his own body. It wasn't one of Demon's favorite memories either. She still didn't know who had been in control of Matthew's body when their son had been conceived.

Shaking her head free of memories, Demon bent back to her task, carefully completing the complex curlicues of the ancient writing she was working on.

Finally, she was finished and she stood slowly, stretching her arms and back to ease the kinks out. Looking around, she could see that Galen, Lily, and Angel had already completed their segments, and Ilas finished just a couple of seconds later.

Galen looked around at the witches and raised an eyebrow in query. They all nodded, and watched in silence as the Technomage walked across the room to a dark corner. Demon watched him stoop and grunt with effort, as he lifted the heavy stone chest containing the Box. He carried it back across the room, placing it carefully on the stone plinth that stood in the center of the pentagram they had drawn on the floor.

Demon sucked in her breath as Galen removed the stone lid and the greenish-yellow light of the Apocalypse Box shone upwards. Somehow, the light looked heavy and viscous, as the beam slowly worked its way up into the gloomy heights overhead, disappearing into the darkness as if swallowed by a hungry maw.

The Technomage stepped back from the plinth, careful not to disturb the writing in the corners of the pentagram. Moving to the point farthest from the door, he held his arms out either side of him, silently inviting the witches to take their places.

Taking a deep breath, Demon pressed the control on her commlink, sending the agreed signal to her husband, then stepped onto her assigned point, closed her eyes, and initiated the merge.

Sitting in Brennan's office, Gideon watched the man closely as he prepared coffee for his visitors. The miner had appeared pleased to see the Captain and his escort when they'd arrived, and immediately

invited them to join him for breakfast. Gideon declined politely, explaining that it was late evening on the ship, and they'd had dinner before coming down. It was a lie, as none of them had been able to eat; all had been too tense and concerned about what was to come.

Brennan had nodded understanding, and then asked if they would like coffee while he ate. Gideon had accepted and followed the miner into his office, aware that G'Tan followed close on his heels, his PPG rifle held at the ready.

The Captain sighed softly to himself, wishing that the weapon G'Tan carried could be used to solve their problem. It would be so much easier if they could just shoot Brennan and get it over with. Then he remembered the time when he'd been in Brennan's position, his body being used by something or someone else, his own consciousness trapped inside the Apocalypse Box. The thought of that entrapment extending to eternity sent a shudder of horror down Gideon's spine. For one brief moment, he almost felt some sympathy with the creature, having to endure the confinement of the Box for ten thousand years. Then he reminded himself of all the people the creature had killed, including one of his crewmen, and he told himself it had forfeited any right to sympathy.

The soft chirrup of sound from his commlink brought Gideon's attention back to the present. It was Deborah's signal. They were starting. Galen had told the Captain that the spell of attraction should act quickly. He and G'Tan had been warned to expect immediate signs of agitation from Brennan, building into restlessness and an inability to stay in one place. Soon the creature would be drawn to the Box, dragged by the spell to its doom.

Gideon looked across the table at Brennan, who was sitting leaning back in his chair, contently sipping on a large mug of hot coffee.

The miner said cheerfully, "You have no idea how grateful we are for the supplies you brought with you, Captain. We were just about out of real coffee, and that substitute we usually rely on just doesn't taste like the real thing." Brennan smiled over the top of his mug, took another long sip, and then closed his eyes, savoring the taste.

Gideon had never seen anyone look less agitated in his life. Brennan's long, delicate fingers were wrapped around the mug, holding it against his chest as he swallowed his coffee, then he opened his eyes and smiled again. "Are you sure you won't join me in some breakfast? The hens have been laying well, and we have plenty of fresh eggs. Our cook does one of the best omelets you've ever tasted. You could have that for supper while I have one for breakfast."

The miners' leader looked quizzically over at the Captain, still showing no signs of restlessness or disturbance. A really bad feeling started to well up in Gideon's stomach, working its way up into his chest and throat, emerging in a curse. "Oh, fuck. It's not you, is it?"

Brennan looked across the table, clearly puzzled.

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

{Part 1: Shifting Sands}