

The Witches of Eriadne: *Interlude Four P - Part 1: The Centauri Trial*

by *The Space Witches*



The real enemy has revealed itself.

Chapter 3

September 2272

The Jury Retires

Demon walked alongside the stretcher carrying her sister from Galen's ship and tried to get her thoughts in order. The events of the last few hours had left her feeling adrift, at odds with herself and the rest of the universe. She had thought she was going to die, and then even worse, she had thought she was going to be forced to live. Alone, without Matthew, without her love and her reason for being.

Demon couldn't quite remember what had happened next. She could recall struggling with Luke and the Centauri guards, and then all she could remember was pain: the pain in her throat, the agony in her eyes, most of all the ache in her head as if something were being dragged out of her, scraping at the soft tissues of her mouth and face as it emerged. Demon felt as if somehow her head had been turned inside out and the contents abraded with sandpaper. But the pain wasn't as bad as the confusion. What was it that had emerged from her? Was the Centauri [Vir? His name was Vir,] correct when he said it was a Vorlon? How could she be carrying a Vorlon inside her without knowing? Had it always been there? Lurking, watching, spying on her at every moment since the Brakiri had awakened her and her sisters. And what about her sisters? Did they carry Vorlons too? Somehow Demon doubted it.

From the day the Vorlons had taken them, they had behaved as if Demon were the leader, the eldest, the one who was responsible for her younger sisters. They had played upon her existing tendency to try to protect Angel, and forced her to extend that protectiveness to her other sisters. If the Vorlons wanted to plant a spy amongst the sisters, why waste resources? It would make more sense just to pick out the leader and control her. Demon wondered how many of her actions over the years had been dictated by the Vorlon within her, and how much control she had really had.

Had she fallen in love with Matthew because the Vorlon wanted her to? Had she unknowingly allowed herself to become pregnant by him because the Vorlon wanted her to breed? Had she overcome all her previous qualms about motherhood because the Vorlon intended her to raise another potential tool for their use? Suddenly, everything Demon had ever done, every feeling she'd had, every decision she'd made was under question. Who was really in control of her life?

The tall blonde gripped Angel's hand tightly as they entered Medbay, barely aware of Lily walking next to her. Demon's free arm rested around Lily's shoulders, providing her younger sister with the comfort she needed, comfort that Demon was badly in need of herself, but which she had no idea where to look for or find. When Lily had flung herself into Demon's arms as they emerged from Galen's ship, Demon had hugged her tightly, but she had felt nothing. She knew that she was just going through the motions of consoling and soothing her little sister. Her blocks had snapped into place when Matthew had begged her to live for him, not die for him, and Demon hadn't been able to sense any emotions around her since that moment. She wondered briefly whether the thing that had emerged from within her had somehow taken her powers away. A part of her almost hoped that it had. Demon wasn't sure that she ever wanted to feel her own feelings again, never mind those of the people around her.

*A gentle nudge in her mind made her realize that her powers had not entirely deserted her. Marcus' mental voice was loud in her mind. *[/Mummy? Why are you sad?/]* Demon tried to pull herself together to send a wave of reassurance to her son. She wasn't sure how successful she was, as Marcus still sounded worried as he sent again, *[/Are you hurt? Has something bad happened? Where's Daddy?/]**

*Demon focused all her attention on her link with the young child, knowing that her confusion was upsetting him. She assured her son that she wasn't hurt and that his Daddy was on the bridge taking care of them all, making sure that they were safe. She told Marcus not to worry about the bangs and thumps he could hear on the hull of the ship, as his Daddy was dealing with it. Demon knew that Marcus believed that his father could do anything, and knowing that Matthew was back on the ship would reassure him more than anything else she could say. She could feel the little boy's relief at her sending, but he refused to be deflected from his first question. *[/You're sad, Mummy. Why are you sad?/]* The tall blonde sighed; Marcus had inherited too many of her empathic abilities for comfort at times. Demon decided that she would have to tell him a little of the truth, in the hope that it would be enough to explain her distraction.*

[/Auntie Angel isn't very well, and I'm a little concerned about her. Nothing for you to worry about, but something nasty seems to have bitten her, and Uncle Luke is going to take care of it.] Marcus sent a brief flare of distress at the thought of his favorite Aunt being hurt. Demon almost managed a smile as she thought how close Marcus and Angel had become. They played together often, Angel being able to give him more time and attention than Lily ever could, with a family of her own to take care of. And Marcus barely knew his other Aunt, as Ilas' visits to the ship had been rare, if eventful.

Demon soothed her son's concerns, playing down the seriousness of Angel's condition. She couldn't lie to her son, as like her, he could always tell when he was lied to, but she could twist the truth, making Angel's condition seem less severe. Marcus was soon pacified, and Demon felt him go back to his toys, playing with his cousins in the crèche across Medbay from where she now stood, still clutching Angel's hand. Demon gave silent thanks for the shielding that they had installed around the crèche. It prevented Marcus from feeling the pain and distress of the wounded being brought into Medbay and treated, as the battle continued.

"Demon? Demon, you have to let go." Demon looked up to see Luke Raven looking at her with concern. "We

have to take Angel into the operating room now. Let go of her hand." He reached down and gently pried her fingers apart, releasing Angel's hand from her grip. Demon watched, still confused, as they carried her sister away from her.

Suddenly, she was assailed by a memory of the Vorlon doing the same thing. Carrying Angel away to experiment on her, to cause her pain while they brought out her latent powers. Demon lost her place in space and time, and she ran screaming after the men carrying Angel's stretcher, begging them not to hurt her, promising that she would do anything they asked if only they'd stop causing her sister so much pain. She felt arms holding her tightly, hugging her close, a hand stroking her hair as Luke Raven's deep voice whispered to her, over and over again. "We won't hurt her, Demon. I promise we won't hurt her. I'll do whatever I can to save her, but you have to let her go."

Demon looked into the warm brown eyes of the doctor, seeing all his care and concern, his determination to save Angel, and she found something to hold onto for the first time since she had entered the Emperor's palace hours earlier. "Save her, Luke. You have to save her."

Luke nodded and turned to follow his team into the operating room, the glass door sliding closed behind him. Demon moved to look through the glass, watching every move the Medbay team made, thinking that she now embodied, now somehow contained, the thing she hated most: the Vorlon that had hurt her and her sisters so badly. Demon had no idea how to go on living with the thing she had now discovered that she was.

Galen stood alongside Demon and Lily as they watched the surgery proceeding on Angel. The Technomage used his visual enhancements to look deep into the wound that Raven had exposed on Angel's neck and knew the doctor was facing a battle he couldn't win. When the Keeper had been attached, it had sunk its barbed claw directly into Angel's nervous system and released millions of nanomites into her body. While the Keeper itself had been burned off, the nanomites remained.



Galen glanced at the tall blonde standing next to him and moved away, increasing the distance between them. Raven had described what had happened in the Emperor's palace while they carried Angel to Medbay, and the Technomage had a very good idea of the identity of the light being that had emerged from Demon. No wonder all his instincts had led him to hate this woman and her sisters. [But not all her sisters, not Angel,] Galen sighed to himself and returned to his thoughts. Demon was carrying in her head one of his people's most hated enemies, and

Galen had no doubt that it influenced her thoughts and actions. It had probably been spying on him since their first encounter, waiting to take advantage of any moment of weakness to destroy him.

The Technomage knew that he would have to find a way to destroy this woman and the evil that inhabited her, but that could wait. For now, the Medbay team was fighting a losing battle on Angel. Using his enhancements, Galen could see that the Keeper was growing back. He knew all about the Keepers and what they had been designed to do. Learning about the Shadows' other servants was part of every Technomage's training. Galen knew that the re-growth was very slow, almost imperceptible, and he doubted that the medical team was even aware of it yet, but it had to be stopped before it got worse.

Galen raised his hand and gestured, and the door to the operating room slid open. Putting a force field in place behind him to keep the area sterile, the Technomage moved in to save Angel's life. The glass in the

window between the operating room and the main Medbay darkened, blocking out the two women who stood watching there.

Gideon walked into Medbay, to see Deborah standing with her head leaning against the darkened window of the operating room. Stopping briefly to say a few words to the members of his crew who were being treated, the Captain made his way across Medbay to where his wife stood. He had left his XO to supervise the repair work going on around the ship, but with instructions to call him if there were any sign of the attack on the Excalibur resuming. Gideon hoped that the universe would give him a little breathing space, enough time to find out if Deborah was recovering from the shock of what had happened on Centauri Prime. Looking at her as she leaned her forehead against the glass, hands pressed palm down either side of her head, Gideon was not optimistic.

Standing behind her, Gideon called her name softly and raised his hand to her shoulder. For a moment, he wondered whether she even knew he was there, then she turned slowly to face him. Deborah's face was blank, her eyes unfocused and glazed as she looked in his direction, but Gideon wasn't sure she saw him at all. He lifted his hand to her ashen face and ran his thumb along her cheekbone, a gesture that usually made her lean her head into his hand. Nothing. No response of any kind. [Not good.] He spoke quietly. "What's happening? Any news on Angel?"

Deborah shook her head slowly, still not focusing on him, but apparently having heard his question. Gideon could barely hear her whispered reply, "I don't know. Galen went in there a while back and darkened the windows. I've been trying to feel what's going on, trying to pick up Luke's feelings, but I can't sense anything."

Gideon went to pull his wife into his arms, but she didn't move, remaining rigid in front of him, not responding to his touch. He stepped back and looked at her again, wondering what he could say to break Deborah out of her current state, becoming seriously worried by her behavior. Gideon tried to capture her attention again. "How's Marcus? Did the battle scare him very much? Is he in the crèche?"

Deborah nodded. "Lily's with him and the other children. I linked to him earlier. He's OK...I think."

"You think? Haven't you been in to see him? Deborah, he's less than five meters away and you've been down here over an hour. What have you been doing since you got here?" Gideon tried to control his anger, but knew he was failing.

Deborah's haunted eyes focused on him for the first time since he'd arrived. She whispered, "Waiting. Thinking," and then she turned back to lean her head against the darkened glass. Gideon frowned at her back. He was too angry to deal with her, and although he tried to understand what she was going through, he failed in the face of what she had done, or rather what she hadn't done. He decided to go see his son and talk to his wife about her actions--or lack of them--later.

The Captain turned and walked through to the Medbay crèche, a facility they'd set up soon after he and John had brought their families aboard. They had installed telepathic shielding after the Stryvsteptixi incident, when it became apparent that Marcus had inherited enough of his mother's empathic abilities to cause him severe distress during a battle. John's son, Dasha, was also showing early signs of telepathic talent, and the shielding prevented him from picking up the thoughts and feelings of the people being treated in Medbay.

Gideon entered the crèche and found Lily sitting in a chair, singing softly, holding her youngest girl,

Naima, against her shoulder with one arm, rocking her gently, while Faylinn, her other daughter, sat on her knee. Naima, at twenty-one months, was barely more than a baby and was sucking her thumb, nearly asleep as her mother rocked her. Faylinn, at three and a half--the same age as Marcus to the day--leaned against Lily's other arm, as her mother stroked her hair. Lily looked up and smiled sadly as Gideon entered, saying quietly, "They were frightened by all the noise and shaking, but they were all very brave." She smiled down at the two boys who sat at her feet.

The Captain looked down at his son, sitting on the floor, leaning against one of Lily's legs, dressed in his pajamas, clutching Half-Ted tightly and looking up at his father sadly. He stooped and picked the boy up, noticing a small bump and bruise on his forehead. Marcus put his arms around his father's neck and clung tightly, whispering loudly, "Flynn and Ima cried when the banging started, but me and Dasha didn't. And I didn't cry when the floor hit my head. Bad ship! Why did it hit me, Daddy?"

Faylinn immediately protested that she hadn't cried, but that Marcus and Dasha had, and they were big babies. Lily smiled up at Gideon and quieted her daughter.

Gideon kissed the bump on his son's head gently, and stroked his hair, then smiled reassuringly at the little boy. "The ship didn't mean to hurt you. She's a good ship really, but she was being chased by some bad people who threw things at her. She couldn't help bouncing around a bit. Does it hurt?"

Marcus nodded, seriously. "A little bit. But I didn't cry!" He turned and glared at Faylinn.

The Captain hugged his son closer. "It's OK to cry, Marcus. We all cry when we're hurt." Gideon remembered all too clearly his own tears on Centauri Prime, when he'd thought that he wasn't going to live to see his son again, and might have to watch his wife die. He carefully controlled and suppressed the anger that had been building inside him since he had seen that Marcus was hurt. [How could Deborah just stand out there and ignore our son? She must have known he was hurt, she would have felt it through their link.] He didn't want Marcus to pick up on his anger, only on his love and concern for the child.

Gideon moved across the crèche to the first aid cabinet, and holding Marcus with his left arm, got out the regenerator that was stored there. Then he went and sat in one of the chairs, his son on his knee, and started to treat the bump. When the swelling and bruising had gone, he looked at his son, whose eyes had filled with tears as he sat quietly on his father's knee. "Does it still hurt?" Gideon was suddenly afraid that the injury might have been worse than it looked.

Marcus shook his head, but the tears overflowed down his cheeks as he asked, "Where's Mummy? Did I do something wrong? Have I been bad?"

Gideon hugged his son tightly, telling Marcus over and over that he was good, that he'd done nothing wrong, that he was the best and bravest boy in the galaxy and that his Mummy and Daddy loved him. Gradually, the little boy stopped crying and looked up at his father. "Did the monster bite Auntie Angel?"

The Captain looked quizzically at Marcus, as the boy explained what his mother had told him. "Was it the monster that bit her? The monster that was biting the man with the hair?" Gideon suddenly realized that his son had somehow been able to see what no one else had, the Keeper attached to the Emperor's neck. He asked Marcus to describe the monster and listened as the little boy told him about the long thin feeler wrapped around Mollari's neck, and the 'thing' with one eye that squatted on his shoulder.

Marcus giggled unexpectedly as he tried to find words to describe the monster. He leaned close to his

father's ear and whispered, "It looked like a big bit of pooh."

Gideon tried to keep a straight face but was soon grinning back at his son, still sitting on his knee but now sitting upright, all signs of tears gone. "A piece of pooh? The Emperor had a piece of pooh on his shoulder?" Marcus giggled again and nodded enthusiastically.

The Captain laughed and whispered in his son's ear. "Don't tell anyone, but I think from now on we'll call him the Em-pooh-ror Mollari. Just you and me, OK? Our secret, no one else will know."

Marcus laughed with delight at the idea of sharing the secret with his father, and was soon demanding the full story of their adventures down on the planet. Gideon gave him a very edited version, placing great emphasis on how Deborah had saved them all. He smiled at his son. "You know what your Mummy is like about mess. Well, there was no way she was going to put up with pieces of pooh on people's shoulders. She soon took care of them."

Marcus laughed again, but then his expression turned wistful. "When will Mummy come to see me? Is Auntie Angel hurt a lot?"

Gideon lifted the boy into his arms and carried him over to one of the beds, saying, "You should have been in bed hours ago. Come on, I'll tuck you in." He laid his son down gently, and pulled the covers over him, then leaned down to kiss Marcus on the forehead, and stood, running his fingers over the little boy's blond curls. [So like his mother's.]

"Auntie Angel isn't very well, but Uncle Luke is with her and Galen is helping too, so I'm sure she'll be fine." Gideon put everything he had into believing his own words, knowing that his son would be able to detect a lie. It seemed to work, as Marcus nodded seriously, and Gideon went on, "Mummy will come to see you soon. She's had a bit of a shock, and she was very scared. I don't think she wants us to know that, as she thinks she has to be strong for us, all the time. But we know her better, don't we? We know that it's OK for her to be scared sometimes, and we still love her anyway." Marcus nodded sleepily and pulled Half-Ted close, starting to suck on the bear's one remaining ear. Gideon stood and watched as his son fell asleep, stroking his hair and sending his love as hard as he could.

When Marcus was finally asleep, Gideon turned and walked to the door of the crèche, stopping as he heard Lily speak.

"Matthew? I heard what you said to Marcus, and to some extent it's true. Demon is holding back because she doesn't want anyone to know how frightened she was--how scared she is. She won't talk to me through our link, and she won't tell me what happened. What exactly did she do down there? You told Marcus that she 'took care' of things. What does that mean?"

Gideon turned back to see that Lily was still holding Naima, but she had put Dasha and Faylinn to bed while he had been talking to Marcus. Lily's red curls were tied back off her face, and she was still dressed in the green silk sundress she'd worn on the planet, although she had pulled on a matching jacket to cover her shoulders in the cooler temperature of the ship. Her skin was even paler than usual and her eyes were red from crying. Gideon realized that Lily had been coping with the children, unsupported by either of her partners, since before the start of the battle. John had been on the bridge since returning to the Excalibur, and Luke had gone straight into surgery. If Deborah had refused to talk to her sister, Lily would have no idea what had happened on Centauri Prime. She wouldn't know about the Vorlon, and Gideon didn't want to be the one to tell her. After all, Lily may have been carrying her own passenger around for years. Gideon didn't want to open that can of worms, until John and Luke were around to help deal with the

consequences.

The Captain walked back to where Lily sat and knelt in front of her, taking her hand and kissing it gently. "Deborah saved us all, but I think she should be the one to tell you exactly what happened. In saving us, she's learned some things about herself that I think she's having problems dealing with. She seems to be in shock, and maybe you can help her with that. She's not listening to me right now, so perhaps you can get through to her." Gideon stood and smiled fondly at the tiny redhead, then frowned as he remembered Deborah's neglect of their son. "And maybe you can get her to tell you why she wouldn't come in here and see Marcus, why she didn't even check through their link that he was OK after the battle."

He sighed deeply, as Lily's distress at his words showed clearly on her face. "I'll have another try at getting through to her, then I'll go back the bridge. As soon as I get there, I'll send John down to you. Just hold on a little longer, Lily, and thank you for taking care of the children."

Lily grabbed Gideon's hand as he went to turn away. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that Marcus had hurt himself. I should have seen..."

Gideon placed his fingers on her lips to stop her. "It was just a small bump, and you have your own three to look after." He looked down at the baby in Lily's arms, so like her mother, and wondered again whether Naima was his daughter. He went on, "Deborah should have been here for Marcus, as you were for your children. It seems she cares more about her sister than she does about our son." He knew he was being unfair but couldn't help himself. [Marcus was hurt!]

Lily gasped at the anger Gideon had finally allowed to show in his voice. "Matthew! That's not fair! Demon loves you and Marcus more than anything else in the universe, and you know it. If she didn't come to see him, there must have been a good reason. Demon would *never* neglect him on purpose."

Gideon smiled sadly at the tiny redhead, saying, "I'll go and have another try at finding out what that good reason is. Take care, Lily." He turned and left the crèche.

Demon stood with her head pressed against the glass, trying to make sense of everything around her. She felt as if somehow everything had shifted, distorted in some strange way, so that nothing and no one was quite what or who she had always believed them to be. Colors and shapes were subtly different, voices didn't sound the same, the texture of the glass against her forehead felt unfamiliar, and even the taste of the tears she had shed was not quite right.

Most peculiar of all was the passage of time, which seemed to drag minutes into hours, then to condense hours into seconds. Demon knew that she had been standing at the window for a long time, both before and since Matthew had appeared, but that time had raced by. The clock told her that over an hour had passed since Matthew had gone into the crèche, but to Demon's senses it felt like only a few moments had gone by before he returned.

The first Demon knew of Matthew's presence was when she felt his anger close behind her. It was the only feeling she had picked up since entering Medbay. She wondered briefly whether her empathy now only worked for negative emotions, whether she had lost the ability to sense love, caring, joy, happiness, all the things she was used to feeling from her husband. Or perhaps it was just that now Matthew knew what she really was, he no longer felt any of those things. [How will I go on if he doesn't love me any more? What will I do if they all hate me, now they know what I am?]

Demon pushed all the feelings of despair and desperation deep down inside her, where there was no risk that she would accidentally send them, and turned to face her husband. Matthew's face was set in stone, as fixed and expressionless as hers. He said quietly, "Marcus was hurt."

Those three words hurt Demon more than any others she had ever heard. She felt the anger and disappointment behind them and knew that there was nothing she could say or do that would ever excuse her behavior. It was inexcusable. She had neglected her son when he needed her, distracted by her own thoughts and feelings. She really was a terrible mother, far worse than her own mother had been. Demon tried to think of something to say, knowing that Matthew expected a response, aware that time was passing in some strange way again, but unable to speak.

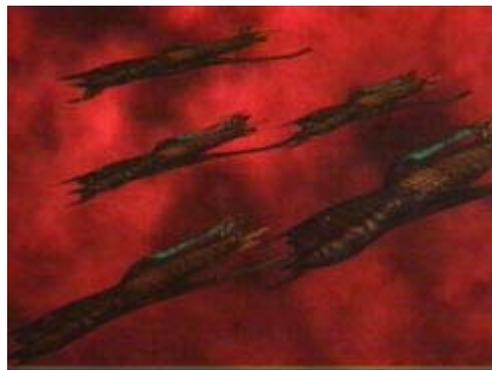
Matthew spoke again, this time allowing the full weight of his anger to flow into his words. "Don't you have anything to say? Don't you care? He was hurt, Deborah, he wanted...no, he needed his mother, and you weren't there for him. What the hell were you doing?"

Demon was saved from having to make a response by the sound of klaxons blaring out through Medbay and John's voice coming over the intercom. "Battle-stations! Battle-stations! Captain to the bridge!"

Matthew glared at Demon as he hissed, "We'll finish this later," spun on his heel and ran from Medbay. Demon turned back and leaned her head against the glass, tears sliding down her frozen face.

Gideon ran onto the bridge and stopped next to Matheson behind the Helm. The viewscreen showed the red of hyperspace, but superimposed over that red was a black diagram, showing where seven ships had jumped in above, below, in front and behind the Excalibur. She was surrounded by a Drakh fleet, which opened fire as Gideon watched.

"All guns return fire!" Gideon rattled out the order. The Excalibur's plasteel hull started reverberating under the barrage and the Captain quickly checked hull integrity. Repairs carried out since the last attack had increased it to 95% of maximum. The Excalibur couldn't take this pounding forever, but the Captain knew he had a little time. He had no intention of sending out his fighters to get shot down, or doing what the Drakh no doubt expected, which was to drop back to normal space. Fighting battles in hyperspace resulted in Pyrrhic victories at best, but Gideon knew that seven Drakh ships would slaughter the Excalibur in normal space. He'd learned that lesson the hard way on the way back to Earth with the cure to the Drakh plague.



The Captain had been half expecting this attack, sure that the Centauri would have summoned their allies as soon as they had the Excalibur in the skies above Centauri Prime. They'd been lucky that the Drakh fleet hadn't arrived before they made their escape from the Centauri system, as Gideon had no doubt that the ships that had stayed neutral in that battle would have quickly joined in the fray when their Drakh masters arrived. So Gideon thanked whatever gods were listening that he had two battles to fight against a divided enemy, rather than one against a combined fleet. This way he had some hope of saving his ship. Had the fleets got together, the Excalibur wouldn't have stood a chance.

Gideon glanced at the helm readouts and saw that they were still on course for the hyperspace anomaly

he'd instructed them to aim for. [Good. And we're just close enough...] Telling his XO to coordinate the guns and defense of the ship, Gideon turned to the Communications console.

"Send out a Mayday on all channels. Set it as loud as you can, send it on every frequency, including those we know are used by the Drakh, and get some message buoys out there, too. I want that Mayday in every ISA language, and any others you can find in the databanks."

The Communications officer looked startled. This was *not* normal procedure when under attack. Normally, a ship would use only the channels and frequencies they thought secure from the enemy. She looked up and queried the Captain. "All channels and frequencies, sir? That's not standard..."

Gideon interrupted her. "You heard me. Follow your orders, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Siddhartha dropped her head and did what she was told, turning to the Captain a few seconds later to say, "Mayday being broadcast as ordered. Message buoys away."

Gideon nodded, staggering to one side as a particularly violent shot hit his ship. He turned to Matheson and raised an eyebrow. "Keep those guns going full blast, Commander. There's too much fire getting through." Matheson nodded abruptly, and Gideon could see that he was gritting his teeth, determined not to ask for the launch of fighters, which would have been the Excalibur's best defense at that time.

The Captain grabbed the back of Siddhartha's chair and gave his next order. "I want you to put this message on a narrow beam and send it straight into that hyperspace anomaly ahead." He dictated the message to the startled Communications Officer. "Have you got that, Lieutenant?"

Siddhartha nodded and repeated the message back to him. "But I don't understand, Captain..."

Gideon shook his head. "Never mind. Just send it."

He watched, hanging on to Siddhartha's chair, as she sent the message, hearing Matheson's announcement, "Hull integrity down to 65%, rear guns out of action, forward guns inoperative on the starboard side, breaches on decks 3, 8 and 17, landing bay doors inoperative..." the litany of damage went on and on. If this ploy didn't work...

Siddhartha looked up from her console, looking even more surprised than earlier. "Message coming in, Captain, but I can't pin down the source. It seems to be coming in over every frequency."

"Out loud, Lieutenant, read it out loud." Gideon grinned.

"Message begins. 'This is Captain Susan Ivanova commanding the destroyer John Proctor, responding to your Mayday. I have five other Warlock class destroyers with me and we are less than ten minutes from your position. Hang on, Excalibur, we're nearly there. We're coming to help clear your skies.' Message ends." Siddhartha looked up, completely confused. "But Captain..."

Gideon smiled down at her as silence settled on the ship. The Drakh had broken off the attack and were turning in hyperspace, running for their lives. They'd obviously come across Ivanova before and had no desire to tangle with her or the six destroyers she had with her. "Yes, Lieutenant? Did you have a question?"

Siddhartha shook her head in confusion. "No, sir, not a question, but permission to speak freely?" Gideon

nodded and the Lieutenant continued, "That's not Captain Ivanova. That's me!"

The Captain grinned. "I know that and you know that, but the Drakh don't know that. They've obviously heard of Captain Ivanova, and like every other intelligent life form in the galaxy, they have no desire to get on the wrong side of her. She scares her allies witless, so it's a pretty good guess that our enemies will run like hell, if they think she's on her way to deal with them."

Gideon turned as John Matheson moved to his side, asking, "Damage? Did we lose anyone?"

Matheson shook his head. "No, sir. We have a few injuries, mostly minor, but no losses. We need a little time to get the Excalibur ship-shape again, but she held together pretty well, considering. Now are you going to tell us what you did, and how you did it?"

The Captain smiled in relief. His plan had worked, and he hadn't lost any more people. Maybe today wasn't such a bad day after all. Glancing at the ship's chronometer, he realized that it was after ship's midnight. A new day. Perhaps it would go better than yesterday.

Gideon explained that the anomaly he'd had the ship heading for acted like an echo device in hyperspace. "I read about these things a while back. Anything you throw into them, they throw right back out at you later. How long is dictated by the spin on the anomaly. This one is spinning at a rate that produces about a five-minute delay. I had Lieutenant Siddhartha send the message from 'Ivanova' directly into the heart of the anomaly on a narrow beam, hoping that the Drakh wouldn't pick it up. After we'd sent out the Mayday on all channels, I guessed they wouldn't be looking for a narrow beam communication and the gamble paid off. Five minutes later, 'Captain Ivanova' sent her message back to us and as far as the Drakh knew, was on her way with six destroyers, all ready to whip their asses from here to the Rim." Gideon couldn't help grinning as he explained, relieved that his plan had worked. He always enjoyed a good bluff.

Turning to Helm, Gideon gave orders to change course to Minbar, "And take us there as fast as she'll move. Lieutenant Jackson," he nodded to his Second Officer who was manning the helm. "You have command. Please get repairs underway and have revised crew rosters in my office in the morning. Commander Matheson and I are going off duty. It's been a long day."

Jackson looked up at her Captain and smiled. "One of our more interesting days, sir. And by the way, I didn't get chance to say earlier, but welcome back. We thought we'd lost you there for a while."

Gideon grinned. "I'm not that easy to lose, Lieutenant. You'll have to try harder next time."

Countermanding all John's protests that he should stay on duty until the repairs were complete, Gideon dragged his First Officer off the bridge and towards the bullet car tube. When they boarded, Gideon quickly said, "Medbay" and turned to Matheson as the bullet car pulled away. "Lily needs you. She's been coping magnificently, but she and your children need you now. And I need to find out what the hell is going on with Deborah, and if Angel is going to be all right. We may be off duty, John, but we still have a long night ahead of us."

Gideon slumped onto one of the seats and in response to John's questions, explained how they had escaped from the Emperor's palace.

"A Vorlon? She's carrying a Vorlon around in her head?" Gideon could hear the surprise in his XO's voice.

"That's what Vir said. It seems to have knocked the stuffing out of her, John. I've never seen her like this, and she didn't even check to see that Marcus was OK." Gideon could feel his anger building again, and quickly suppressed it.

John was looking at him, his expression appalled. "Matthew, this must be a nightmare for Demon. It was a Vorlon that took the sisters from their homes and their time, hurt them, tortured them even, to turn them into the tools they were supposed to become. Then that same Vorlon locked them away in stasis, abandoning them to an uncertain future, not caring what happened to them. Everything bad that has ever happened to the sisters was because of what the Vorlon did to them. For Demon to find out that she's been carrying one in her head all this time..." John shook his head in amazement then looked back at his Captain. "She's going to need a lot of help, Matthew. She must be really hating herself right now."

Gideon leaned back against the wall of the bullet car and closed his eyes. John's words had made him realize just what his wife must have been going through since she awakened in the palace. Deborah had been in terrible pain and confusion, and he hadn't been there for her. She had just had what was probably the worst day of her life, thinking that she had lost Angel, thinking that she was going to lose her husband, thinking that she was going to die, then finding that she was carrying a being she hated inside her. No wonder Deborah had been unable to function properly since she got back to the ship.

And the one person she should have been able to rely on, the first person she had come to really trust since she was a child, had let her down when she needed him most. Gideon tried to make excuses for his own behavior, telling himself that his own day hadn't exactly been a picnic, and that he'd had a ship, a crew, an injured son and two battles to think about since he'd got back to the Excalibur. Even so, he still had no idea how he was ever going to make it up to Deborah, or how he would ever persuade his wife to trust him again.

Lily sat watching the door to the crèche anxiously. She knew that John and Luke would come to her there as soon as they could. She knew that the best place for her to be at that time was looking after the children, making sure that they were safe and taken care of, but it was hard to wait patiently for someone to tell her what was happening.

The young redhead looked lovingly at the children, all curled up in their beds, deeply asleep. She stood and walked to where Marcus lay sleeping and brushed back the blond curls that had fallen over his forehead, checking that all signs of his injury had gone. No matter what Matthew said, Lily blamed herself for not having seen that the little boy was hurt, but just then she was far more worried about Marcus' mother than she was about the child.

She had tried to link to Demon several times, but her sister had refused to respond after the first time, when she had just said, [//Later, Lily. I'll tell you what happened later. When Angel is better...//] Demon's mental voice had quavered then grown stronger again, [//Yes, that will work, I'll tell you both together...//] Demon's thoughts had faded completely and Lily had been unable to make contact since.

The doors to the crèche opened and John stood in the doorway. Lily threw herself across the room and into his arms, hugging him tightly as he held her, stroking her hair and sending telepathic waves of love and reassurance. After a little while, John swept Lily into his arms and carried her to the chair, sitting with her cradled in his arms while she wept quietly into his shoulder. When her tears subsided, John lifted her chin and wiped away the tears, kissing her gently as she thought to him, [//What's happening? Why is everyone behaving so oddly? I know Angel is hurt and Luke is with her, but why won't Demon link to me, and why is Matthew so angry? He said Demon saved their lives, but he won't say how, and none of it

makes sense!]

Lily's temper was rising. She hated being ignored, and she felt left out and bewildered when both of her sisters had been hurt, but no one would tell her what was happening. If she had been standing, she would have stamped her foot in annoyance.

John's serene, soothing thoughts washed over her, calming her temper, wrapping her in his love. [//OK, I'll tell you everything that Matthew told me.]] He started by telling Lily about the Keeper that had been attached to Angel, and how the Emperor had threatened to have Luke, Matthew and Demon killed.

Lily was beyond stamping her foot by now; the red head was ready to kick ass, and she wasn't that picky about whose ass she kicked. "I know all that! Demon told me that much through our link, but no one will tell me how they got away. Matthew said that Demon had saved them, but he wouldn't say how. I want to know what she did, and she won't tell me either!" She spoke louder than she'd intended and stopped abruptly when Dasha stirred in his sleep. Lily glared fiercely at John as she thought, [//Tell me!]]

John sighed deeply, sending more waves of calm and serenity at her. He started to explain how the Vorlon had emerged from Demon, burning off the Keepers attached to Angel and the Emperor, then stunning or killing the guards and allowing the Captain, Luke and Demon to escape, with the help of one of the Centauri and Galen.

Lily stared at John in horror as she whispered, "A Vorlon? There's a Vorlon inside Demon?" She was nearly overwhelmed by panic and fear.

John tried to soothe her, saying aloud, "It's OK, whatever it was, seems to have gone back to where it was hiding. She's still Demon, she's still your sister, and nothing has changed except that she's going to need all of our help to get through this."

Lily shook her head, still trying to comprehend what John had told her, and whispering, "You don't understand." She could hardly bring herself to say the words that expressed her fear. "If there's one of those monsters inside Demon, is there one inside me, too?"

She watched as John's expression changed to reflect her own shock and horror.

Gideon sat in Luke's chair, his feet up on Luke's desk, watching his wife. He had been sitting there for hours now, half dozing, always watching, as Deborah stood unmoving in front of the door to the operating room. When he and John had arrived, John had gone directly through to the crèche, while Gideon had stopped at Deborah's back. She hadn't moved or turned from her position, and he'd wondered whether she'd even noticed his arrival. He'd reached out and touched her shoulder gently, to attract her attention.

Deborah had turned slowly and looked at him, seeming to need a few moments to register his presence. Her face had been white and frozen, her eyes dark and wide, with a faraway, unfocused look in them. Then she'd started to whisper, her words completely flat and emotionless, a continuous monotone.

"Marcus is all right he slept through and he's all right but I can't find Angel they've taken her away and I can't find her they're going to hurt her I know they're going to hurt her and I can't find her but Marcus is all right he wasn't hurt this time I linked with him as he slept and he didn't even have a bad dream bad dream nightmare it's all a nightmare and I wish I could wake up but Marcus is all right he isn't hurt I'll

never hurt him again like I hurt Angel but what if I hurt Marcus if it comes out and hurts Marcus like it hurt Angel but Marcus isn't hurt he's not hurt Marcus is all right he isn't hurt I won't hurt him again..."

Gideon hadn't been able to bear listening and had pulled Deborah into his arms, trying to pull her head down to his shoulder, trying to muffle the words that had continued to pour out of her, trying to stop her pain, but knowing that he was failing. He'd been appalled at how she had deteriorated since he'd last seen her. Far from recovering from the shock, she seemed to be sinking further into distraction and despair with every hour that passed, and he had no idea how to stop her or pull her back. Deborah hadn't sent her feelings. For all the emotion Gideon had sensed from his wife, he may as well have been hugging a block of concrete, and her body had about the same degree of flexibility as she'd stood rigidly in his arms.

After a few moments of trying to calm her, telling her how sorry he was and trying to get her to listen, Gideon had realized that he wasn't getting through. Deborah had locked herself into her own world of pain, and she wasn't letting anyone reach her there. Gideon had wanted to weep as he'd wondered how much his anger had been responsible for her pulling the door to that world closed behind her. He had begged her to listen to him, to forgive him for what he'd said and the anger he'd felt, but nothing he said or did seemed to get through. Deborah had just stared over his shoulder, whispering incoherently. Then she'd turned in his arms and stood, once more staring at the door to the operating room.

Gideon had finally let go of her and moved to Luke's desk, hoping against hope that Luke would be able to save Angel, because that was the only chance Gideon could see that Deborah's sanity might be saved. Perhaps for Angel, she could break out of the mental prison she'd shut herself into.

John and Lily had emerged from the crèche soon after and he'd watched as Lily had approached Deborah, her fear obvious even to Gideon. Lily had stood by her sister as John came over to where Gideon sat, and he had quietly explained Lily's fear that she too might carry a Vorlon.



The Captain had watched as the two sisters stood, not moving or touching, their estrangement obvious to anyone who knew them. Then Lily had turned and rushed to where John waited for her. John had taken her in his arms and held her tightly as she wept. Gideon had closed his eyes and prayed that one day Deborah might recover enough, and forgive him enough, to allow him to do that for her.

Then they had all waited.

The sound of the operating room doors opening roused Gideon from a light doze. Glancing at the clock, he saw it was now 05:00 ship's time. In another hour or so, Marcus would be awake and asking for his mother again.

Luke emerged from the room, closely followed by Galen. The Technomage said nothing as his eyes swept around the Medbay, moving from one person to the next. He glared at Gideon where he sat with his feet on Luke's desk, then at John, who was sitting on another chair with Lily in his arms. Deborah stood by the darkened window, in the same place where she had stood for all the hours that had passed since she'd arrived in Medbay. The look on Galen's face as he gazed at Deborah made Gideon shiver. He'd seen the Technomage's face express many things, but he'd never seen that look of cold hatred before. If looks could kill, Deborah would have been struck down dead on the spot. Galen swept out of Medbay before anyone could stop or question him, his black coat flapping behind him as he went.

Gideon stood, stiff from so many hours of immobility, and watched as Deborah stirred at last. Lily leaped from John's knee and rushed over to Luke, words bubbling out of her as she demanded to know if Angel was all right and if Luke was all right. Luke pulled his tiny lover into his arms and kissed the top of her head, before smiling around at all those waiting.

"Angel's going to be fine. We got that thing out of her, and with Galen's help, we made sure it will never grow back. Angel is safe."

The Verdict

Demon was barely aware of Galen leaving Medbay, her attention was totally locked on Luke and what he had to say. Hearing that Angel was safe, she felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from her. She went to move past Raven into the operating room, but he blocked her path.

"Just wait a little while, Demon. She's still out and won't wake up for a few minutes yet. My people are just tidying up in there, let them finish, then they'll take her to a room where you can see her." Luke was holding Lily tightly to his side, smiling down at her as he spoke.

Demon felt movement behind her and became aware that Matthew was standing there. She locked herself tightly under control, ashamed of her lapse earlier, when all her fears had come spilling out of her. She had seen how distressed Matthew had been by what she'd said, and had promised herself that she wouldn't lose control again. [It's not fair. He doesn't need me to fall apart on him now. He's got too many other things to worry about. I won't add to his worries. I have to be strong, somehow I have to be strong and get through this. My sisters need me, Marcus needs me, oh Marcus darling I'm so sorry I should have been there and I wasn't you were hurt and I wasn't there I should have been there and Matthew is so angry because I wasn't there and he's afraid of me now I can feel his fear there's nothing but fear that's all I can feel fear not love no love just fear and...]

Demon pulled herself up sharply, as her thoughts threatened to disintegrate into chaotic circling again. She focused on Luke, who was looking at her, frowning.

"Demon? What did you say? I couldn't hear you."

[Oh god, you were talking aloud! Stop it! Control yourself!] Demon felt Matthew's hand on her shoulder and shuddered. How could he bear to touch her, now he knew what she was? She felt his hand move and she knew that he'd felt her shudder. As Matthew's touch fell away, Demon felt one last emotion from him, and it was just as she had expected. The only feeling he had for her now was fear.

Demon somehow stopped the scream of pain that threatened to escape her and focused on Luke and his question. She whispered, "How did you get it out of her? The Centauri man said they always grow back." Demon couldn't remember the name of the man who had helped them escape. [Why can't I remember his name? I remembered it earlier it's such a short name I should remember it what's the matter with me I should remember it he helped us and saved us and I can't even remember his name.] She knew it was silly to feel so bad about forgetting a name, but she couldn't help herself.

Luke smiled at Demon, as he reached out to put his free arm around John. Demon watched as her sister's lovers embraced and seeing the love that the three of them still felt for each other sent a deep pain through her chest, reminding her of what she had lost. Pushing that aside, she concentrated on Luke's response to her question.

"We couldn't have done it without Galen's help. We went in after the parts of whatever it was that had embedded itself in her, and we removed ten or more--well, I can only describe them as tentacles--which had wound their way into her nervous system. But as fast as we cut them out, they grew again. It was like trying to fight a virus, it multiplied and replicated as we cut away at it, and we were doing more and more damage to Angel's shoulder and nervous system each time we cut. I was beginning to think that Vir had been right, when Galen marched in."

Demon's mind locked onto the name. [Vir, that was his name, it was Vir.] She shook her head briefly, angry with herself for her distraction with trivia. She asked quietly, "What did Galen do?" She knew that the Technomage still had strong feelings for her sister and had tried to like him more for that, and for his friendship with Matthew, but she had never warmed to the man.

Luke shook his head in wonder. "He demanded that I slit his wrist! I was ready to yell at him that if he wanted to kill himself, he should go do it where he wouldn't get in my way, when he explained. Apparently, Technomages have electronic implants to help them do their Technomagic thing, and in their bloodstream they have nanomites that help build the implants and keep them running smoothly. Galen told me that a transfusion of his nanomites into Angel would provide her with a defense against the thing that was attacking her nervous system."

Luke paused to kiss Lily as she gazed up at him, then looked back at Demon and smiled. "Frankly, at that point there weren't many options open to us. I should probably have checked with you, Demon, but I took the risk. We took a blood transfusion from Galen, filtered out all the factors that might react badly with Angel's blood, then pumped what was left into her. The effect was instant. The thing stopped growing immediately, allowing us to cut it out completely. This time we got it all out, so we could close the wound and regenerate the tissue damage around the site. We had to do a skin graft, and Angel is going to have a sore shoulder for a while, but she should recover completely within a few days."

Demon tried to concentrate on the good news Luke had just given them, but her mind seemed only able to think of one thing. She had to ask, "And the nanomites? What about them?"

Raven gave her a sad smile. "They're still in her. Galen tells me that they'll do her no harm. In fact, they may improve her immune system. There wasn't a lot of choice, Demon, it was the only way to save her."

Demon nodded. She was sure that Luke was telling her the truth, but she wondered how Angel would feel about carrying part of the Technomage within her. While Angel and Galen had become friends over the last few years, Demon wasn't sure that her sister would be happy with this solution. Still, if the alternative was a Keeper... Demon knew that she would have to try to convince Angel to accept what had happened.

A nurse stopped on her way out of the operating room and spoke quietly to Luke, who turned to Demon and smiled. "You can go through now, we've moved her to a side room and she's just coming round."

Gideon watched as the three sisters hugged each other. Their reunion had been silent but he guessed that they had been mind linked from the moment they had come through the door. The first thing they had seen was Angel, propped up against the pillows of her bed, her shoulder swathed in bandages. For once, she wasn't wearing red, just a gray hospital gown.

Demon and Lily were taking great care not to touch Angel's injuries as they held her. Gideon listened as

Luke told them that the skin graft would take some time to heal completely, but any resultant scarring would fade within a few months.

All three sisters were crying freely as they held each other. Gideon hoped that this might give Deborah some emotional relief, that it might help her to let go of some of the pain she'd been holding in since her return from the planet, and since his stupid outburst of anger. [Stupid! Why didn't you think how she might be feeling? You should trust her enough to know that she'd never willingly neglect Marcus. How could you have even thought she'd do that, if she could have prevented it?]

Gideon continued to berate himself, as he watched the emotional reunion in front of him, then he noticed that something was missing. He realized that he wasn't feeling anything from Deborah. She wasn't sending her relief and her happiness that Angel was safe. In fact, she wasn't sending anything. That meant Deborah was still locking down on her emotions, not allowing herself to relax and project what she felt. [Not good.] If she didn't feel able to share her happiness with her family and friends, then there was little chance that she'd allow anyone to help her with the pain and fear she must still be feeling. Gideon mentally kicked himself again for having failed his wife when she needed him most.

Finally, the sisters relaxed their hold on each other and Angel was able to see beyond them to Gideon, Raven and Matheson, who stood behind, waiting patiently. Gideon saw the flare of anguish in Angel's eyes as she saw the men standing there, and she blushed fiercely as she looked at him and Luke. Tears trickled down her face as she spoke, her words tumbling out of her.

"I'm so sorry! It was my fault, and I put you all in danger, and I'm so sorry! I should never have disobeyed your order, Captain. If I hadn't gone with Ursa, none of this would have happened, you wouldn't have had to come back for me and..." Angel seemed to choke on her own tears and had to force her next words out. "You could all have been killed and it would have been my fault."

Gideon tried to stay angry with her, but couldn't. The sight of her bandaged shoulder, the tears streaming down her face and her beautiful blue eyes reddened from weeping, drained all the anger from him. He sighed deeply and smiled sadly as he replied, "It's OK, Angel, but next time, please, do as I say? I don't give orders just for the hell of it. I usually have a reason."

Angel nodded, then flinched as her sore shoulder protested at the movement. Deborah moved to take her right hand, stroking it gently, as Lily sat on the bed next to Angel, hugging her sister carefully. Gideon stood back to let Luke and John go the bedside, speaking quietly to Angel, telling her gently that she was safe now, that they were all safe.

Gideon watched his wife as this was going on. She sat rigidly, holding Angel's hand, but her face was locked into an impassive mask. The Captain wondered what Deborah was feeling, trying to imagine what conflicting emotions must be running through her. Happiness at Angel's recovery certainly, but was Deborah still frightened of what she was carrying inside her? Was she angry with him for his unfair attack on her? Worried about Marcus? Whatever she was feeling, her face showed nothing. Deborah was in full Ice Queen mode and Gideon wondered if she would ever thaw under his touch again. Had he pushed her too far this time? She'd forgiven him for his stupid behavior on Mars, when they were first married; could she forgive him again?

The Captain shook his head. This wasn't just about him, this was far more fundamental. How could his wife ever come to terms with carrying an alien consciousness inside her head? An alien that had abducted and abused her, torturing her and her sisters to become a weapon in its war. Gideon wondered how he could possibly help Deborah accept such a thing, and whether she would even be willing to allow him to

try.

The beeping of Gideon's commlink provided a distraction from his depressing thoughts. He lifted his wrist to his mouth, saying, "Gideon. Go."

Jackson's voice emerged from the wristband. "Sorry to bother you, Captain, but could you come back to the bridge? We're picking up some transmissions that I think you'll want to see."

"I'll be with you in five minutes." Gideon turned back to the others and spoke softly. "I suggest that everyone gets some rest. John, you're off duty until this evening, so go spend some time with your family. Doctor, you must be about dead on your feet, so I'm sending you off duty, too."

He turned to the sisters, addressing each in turn. "Lily, thanks for everything." Gideon didn't want to specify what he was thanking her for. If he mentioned her caring for Marcus during the battle, it might make Deborah think he was implying a criticism of her absence at that time. Gideon felt he'd done enough damage in that area already.

"Angel, you'd better follow the doctor's orders, or you'll have me to answer to." He smiled to take the sting out of his words, but Angel's serious nod showed him that she knew he wasn't entirely joking. Gideon paused as John and Luke kissed Lily gently, hugged their red haired lover and left Medbay, telling her that they'd take their children back to their rooms.

As John and Luke left, Gideon turned to his wife. "Deborah..." Looking at her frozen face stopped his words in his throat. He loved her so much, and he was afraid that he'd hurt her too much for her ever to forgive him. Gideon moistened his dry lips and started again. "I'll get back as soon as I can. Maybe you should leave Marcus in the crèche while you get some sleep. It's been a long day." Gideon knew it had been over twenty-four hours since Deborah had slept.

Deborah shook her head slowly and spoke quietly, in the flat monotone that Gideon hated. "I'll take him back to our quarters as soon as he wakes up. I won't leave him again."

Gideon swallowed hard. Deborah hadn't forgotten or forgiven his outburst. Would she ever? He stepped forward and kissed her cheek gently. It was like kissing marble: cool and rigid. Gideon moved his head slightly to whisper in her ear, "I love you," all the while fearing that it was too late, that he'd hurt her too much. He stepped back to watch Deborah's reaction, but there was none. Her face remained frozen, and she didn't reply.

Gideon turned and left the Medbay, trying to control his fear that he'd destroyed his marriage.

It took every bit of control Demon had for her not to break down into anguished screams as she watched her husband leave Medbay. She'd heard his whispered words, and for a brief moment, allowed herself to hope that he still loved her, that somehow he could forgive her, and they could rebuild what they'd once had. Then Demon had felt Matthew's fear, and she knew it was hopeless. He was just trying to be kind, when deep down he feared her and what she'd become.

Demon didn't blame him. She was frightened of herself. If the Vorlon could emerge once to attack Angel, the Emperor and the guards, it could do the same again at any time. Demon had no control over it. How could she know what might provoke it to attack? Next time it might kill someone, and it could be someone she loved, someone who the Vorlon perceived as a threat, even if she didn't. There was no way to be sure.

Demon pulled herself up short. That wasn't true. There was a way. She could go away, lock herself away from everyone she loved, to remove the threat from them, to prevent any possibility of ever being responsible for injuring them. Demon told herself that she had been alone for most of her life, she could survive by herself again.

It wasn't quite so easy in practice. Demon knew that her link to Marcus and her sisters would make it impossible to physically remove herself. She would have to stay on the Excalibur, but somehow she had to find the strength to remove herself emotionally, to distance herself from her loved ones, so that she could never be a threat to them. The problem was that Demon didn't know how she could do that. [Maybe my sisters can help me. Maybe Angel and Lily can help me get control over this thing inside me. Maybe if we merge, we can somehow lock it away deep inside me, where it can't hurt anyone.]

Demon turned to look at her sisters, and the first thing she saw was the fear in Lily's eyes. Lily knew. Demon realized that Matthew must have told John what had happened on the planet, and John had told Lily. Now Lily was just as afraid of her as Matthew was, as all her friends and family would be, once they knew what she was.

The gentle squeezing of her hand brought Demon's attention to her other sister, and she tried to smile as Angel looked at her, quizzically. "Demon? What's the matter? Why won't you link to me? Are you angry with me?"

Demon had been blocking Angel and Lily from her mind since entering the room, unwilling to let them know the pain and turmoil she was feeling. She knew that if she linked to them, they would feel everything, and she couldn't allow that. So Demon had kept them out, trying to protect them from the maelstrom of despair inside her.

Angel started to cry softly as she went on, "I'm so sorry. Please don't be angry with me, please don't block me out, I can't tell you how sorry I am..."

Demon silenced Angel by pulling her close and hugging her sister as tightly as she dared. She spoke softly, as she rocked Angel gently in her arms. "It's all right. It's not you, it's me. I'm not angry with you, darling, of course I'm not angry, it's just..." Demon ground to a halt, as she caught Lily's gaze. She continued to rock Angel gently until her sister's tears subsided.

Angel looked up at her elder sister, asking, "What happened, Demon? I remember you coming to the throne room and all the terrible things that were said but then it's all a blank. How did we get away?"

This was the question that Demon had been dreading; the question that she knew couldn't be avoided, especially as it was obvious that Lily already knew the answer. Demon braced herself, controlling all the pain and fear that welled up inside her, and quietly explained to her sisters what had happened. As she told them, calmly and dispassionately, how she had refused to leave Matthew, how Luke and the guards had dragged her away, Demon could see the sorrow in her sisters' eyes. Did they blame her for abandoning her child? Would Lily ever have chosen to die with John or Luke rather than to live for her children? Demon was sure her sisters would never agree with her decision, thankful for once that she couldn't sense their feelings, not wanting to feel their condemnation.

She continued in a soft monotone to describe how the Vorlon had emerged from inside her. "I never knew it was there, although I guess in a way it makes sense. Now we know where the power for our merge comes from. When we merge together, I think the Vorlon may become part of what we are, driving us, providing the energy that allows us to..." Demon bit her lip, unable at first to say the words. She forced them out.

"To kill."



Demon had kept her head down, not looking at her sisters as she'd explained what had happened. Now, at last, she raised her head and was met with looks of horror. Her sisters were afraid. Afraid of what she was and what she could do. Demon wanted to scream with pain from her sense of loss.

[Gone, it's all gone! I've lost it all I've lost my sisters I've lost Matthew oh my love Matthew how will I live without you I wish I'd died on the planet it would be better than this better than living without your love without my sisters without my son I can't be a mother to him now I might hurt him but I can't live without him I can't live without you Matthew my love my life I can't live I can't live without everything all gone all gone all gone...]

Demon forced her desperation down deep where no one would ever see it or feel it, terrified that if it escaped her control, as it had once before on Mars, she would start projecting her anguish. Her greatest fear was that she would lose control and the Vorlon would again emerge to attack whatever it perceived to be threatening her, and that could be her sisters, her son or her husband. Somehow, Demon had to stay in control. Somehow, she had to stop the Vorlon ever getting out of her again.

The sensation of Marcus pulling at the link between their minds as he awoke provided an almost welcome distraction, although Demon had no idea how she was going to stay linked to her son, without him picking up any of her despair. She just knew she had to try.

Speaking softly, Demon said, "I have to go. Marcus is waking up, and I've neglected him for long enough. I know this is a shock for you both. Perhaps when we've all had time to take it in, we can talk about what this means to us. I'll leave you to talk." She kept her eyes averted, not willing to see her sisters' faces as she turned to leave the room.

As Demon reached the door, she heard Angel's voice behind her, shaky with emotion. "Demon, we still love you. Nothing can ever change that."

Demon stopped in her tracks, unable to turn and look at her sisters, but for a moment unable to move one foot in front of the other. She swallowed hard and forced her words out through a throat tightened by anguish. "Thank you, darling. I love you too, both of you." Demon used all the strength in her to start moving and get out of Angel's room, convinced that her sister was lying, and that Angel, like Matthew, was just trying to be kind.

As the doors closed behind Demon, Lily looked over at where Angel lay propped against the pillows. She whispered, "What are we going to do, Angel?"

Angel reached out and grabbed Lily's hand, squeezing it hard. She swallowed and said, "I don't know, but we have to help Demon somehow, she's hurting badly. She's doing her usual big sister thing, pretending she can handle it, but it's killing her, Lily. She's so frightened..." Angel's words trailed off as her tears choked her.

Lily leaned across the bed to hug her sister. "I know. I'm just not sure what we can do to help her. It's a Vorlon, Angel. She has a Vorlon inside her, and I can't forget what they did to us. What if it decides it

wants us back? What if it tries to take us away from our families? What if..." Lily bit her lip, almost afraid to vocalize her worst fear. She forced her words out through her tightened throat. "What if we have parts of the Vorlon inside us, too?"

Angel's eyes widened with fear as she took in Lily's words. "Oh gods, Lily, no! If we have, they could take over at any time, they could hurt us and try to force us to be their weapon again. Oh no, Lily, not again, not that. I couldn't stand that again." Angel started to sob, burying her head in her hands.

Lily reached out to stroke her sister's hair, trying to calm and soothe her. "Angel, I know, I know how you feel, but I've been thinking about it ever since John told me what happened on the planet. I don't think you can have one of those things inside you. It would never have allowed them to put that Keeper on you, would it? It would have attacked them much earlier if it had been able." She watched as Angel raised her face, her mixed fear and hope showing clearly.

Angel spoke eagerly, "You're right! If the one inside Demon attacked the Keeper on me..." Lily saw the shudder that ran through her sister at the thought of what had been done to her, and she reached out again to squeeze Angel's hand. "It would have attacked as soon as they tried to attach the thing to me, wouldn't it?" Angel's voice and expression were filled with pleading.

Lily nodded. "I think so. I'm sure of it. Even if you were knocked out at the time, I can't imagine them being able to knock out a Vorlon if it were inside you like that. It would have reacted. You can't have one inside you, Angel, it doesn't make sense, but..." She ran out of words, reluctant to express her deepest fear.

Angel's expression changed to one of sadness as she said, "Oh Lily, you can't have...they wouldn't...they couldn't..."

Lily's anguish poured out of her. "I keep telling myself that they always worked through Demon, they looked on her as our leader. If they were going to leave a part of one of them with us, they'd have stayed just in her, but..." The tiny redhead's fear was overwhelming her as she rushed on, "But what if they didn't? What if they wanted some sort of back up in place? Oh, Angel, if I have one of those things inside me, it could come out and hurt my children! It could hurt Luke or John or you or anyone. How can I be sure?"

Angel pulled her little sister into a hug, giving back the comfort she had received a few moments before. "I don't know, Lily, I just don't know. The only thing I do know is that Demon is sure she has one of those things inside her, one of the things that hurt us so badly. If we're frightened by the possibility, *knowing* it's there must terrify her. She must be petrified that the Vorlon might hurt Marcus or Matthew or one of us, and being who she is, she'll try to protect us all from it. You know what she's like, Lily, she'll lock herself away and she won't let anyone help her, but this time I don't think even Demon can handle what's happened. I just hope that she'll let Matthew help. He's the only person she's ever really been willing to lean on, maybe he can help her."

Lily shook her head sadly. "I'm not sure. Matthew was very angry with her when Marcus was hurt during the battle..." Lily stopped as Angel gasped, and gave her sister a brief summary of what had happened. "Demon would have felt his anger and blamed herself for not being there for Marcus. If she thinks she let Matthew down by not taking care of Marcus, Demon will just keep trying harder and harder to be strong and cope by herself. She won't want to let Matthew down again."

The two sisters stared at each other in silence for a while. Lily hardly knew what she feared most. The possibility of having a Vorlon inside her was frightening enough. The addition of her fears about what

might happen to Demon was almost intolerable. [I have to think. I have to get away and think this through.]

Lily squeezed Angel's hand and tried to smile. "Try not to worry about it too much, Angel. You need to rest and recover. We'll get through all this somehow, and we'll find a way to help Demon get through it, too." She helped Angel to lie back on her bed, removing the pillows that had kept her sister upright, then pulling up the covers to tuck Angel in.

Angel smiled bravely at her little sister. "I'm not Naima, you know. Next you'll be trying to read me a bedtime story."

Lily gave a shaky little laugh, "I promise I'll only do that if you ask, but I will kiss you goodnight," she leaned over to kiss her sister's forehead, "and wish you sweet dreams. Try to get some rest, and I'll come back to see you later." Lily watched as Angel nodded, heavy eyed, then she waited until Angel was asleep, before standing to leave the room.

She stopped outside Medbay, reluctant to return to her quarters until she had thought things through. A brief check through her link to her children confirmed that all three were still asleep, and she knew that by now John and Luke would be sleeping too, exhausted from their long day. Lily had slept in John's arms in Medbay the previous night, so she knew she had a little time to herself. [But where should I go? Where can I get the peace and quiet I need?] Lily smiled as she thought of the perfect place. The place that always brought back memories of one of the happiest moments of her life.

Lily sealed the door using one of John's codes, then stood there for a moment, letting her eyes adjust themselves to the darkness, before she called out in a raw voice, "Lights, five percent." The computer beeped and obeyed, and Lily made her way through the orchard until she stood where she had been hand-fasted to Luke and John, only three years before. The lights had been out completely when Lily arrived, simulating night for the plants in the arboretum. Lily had created dawn a few minutes early, although not early enough to damage the plants.

Lily walked up to one of the fruit trees and gently put her palms against its bark. Suddenly, she blinked and lifted her hands in front of her, staring at them as she turned them, flexing her fingers, touching them to each other, as if they were things she'd never seen before.

She started trembling so much that her legs gave way under her. Lily sank down onto her knees, back onto her heels, desperately hugging herself as tears streamed down her face. Her emerald green eyes stared blindly, as she relived memories of the Vorlon 'treatments', bringing back all the pain and fears she'd felt then--first only her own, then after the merge those of her sisters, too. With the pain came the rage. Staring up at the ceiling, through it, out into the universe, she cursed, her voice thick with tears.

"All gods damn you! Why can't you just leave us alone? Just when we were happy, beginning to live a life of our own, you come back again and destroy everything! You think you're so much better than the younger races? Well, you are much worse; you claim you stand for 'order', but all you can do is cause pain, just like the Shadows! You hurt us so much in creating our entity that we can't help but fear you, and you know it! How could you be so cruel as to put one of you inside Demon, maybe even into Ilas or me? What did we do to you that you keep hurting us? Why do you want us to hurt each other? WHY?" That last word turned into an anguished cry, only gradually fading into sobs as Lily sank to the ground, beating the earth with her fists and wetting it with her tears.

Lily slipped into the children's room, softly illuminated by nightlights. As she looked at her sleeping children, love and relief surged through her. She didn't know what she'd have done if even one of them had been hurt. [Thank the Goddess, I didn't have to find out.]

Suddenly, Dasha stirred, tossing and turning in his sleep, and Lily walked up to his bed to gently stroke his thick black hair, sending reassurance through their link. Dasha calmed, as he rolled onto his back, slowly opening his eyes and blinking up at her. "Ma?" he whispered.

"Yes, darling. I'm here, everything is all right," Lily answered in a low voice, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Dasha got up onto his knees and hugged his mother, then sat back on his heels and looked at her, his dark eyes wide open. "Are you all right, Ma? Where have you been?"

Lily couldn't help but smile. Dasha was getting ever more sensitive to other's feelings as his telepathic abilities were awakening. "I just needed to be alone for a while, to think about some things. But I'm all right now."

Lily felt the mattress shift behind her, and a pair of tiny arms hugged her from behind. She looked around to see her older daughter kneeling there. "Hey, you're supposed to be asleep," Lily chided softly, but her smile showed that she wasn't mad.

The twins were very much attuned to each other, so Lily wasn't surprised when Faylinn stated quietly, "You woke me up. Anyway," she continued, "Why do we have to sleep, when you can stay up all night?"

Lily lifted Faylinn onto her right leg and gestured for Dasha to sit on her left. "Well, I usually sleep at night, just like you, although I'd much rather stay up." She grimaced, showing her discontent about this, making the twins giggle. "But tonight, I needed to wait until Auntie Angel woke up, and after all the excitement today, I had to calm down before going to bed."

"How is Auntie Angel?" Faylinn asked eagerly, as Lily hugged the twins.

"She's fine. Dad and Galen saw to that." Lily let them feel her relief and joy about Angel's recovery through their link. "She still needs some rest, but she'll get well quickly now."

"And Auntie Demon?" The way her son's dark eyes were intently fixed on her reminded Lily of his father, when he was asking harmless questions but meaning something much deeper. She wondered to herself, [Did Dasha feel something wrong with Demon when she got Marcus from the crèche?]

She looked at her son, doing her best to suppress her worry and fear for her oldest sister. "Auntie Demon needs time to recover from the shock of what happened on Centauri Prime. But don't worry, Uncle Matthew, Marcus and Auntie Angel will help her. And we will too, won't we?" The twins agreed eagerly.

Suddenly, Lily felt incredibly tired. "OK then, back to bed with you now," she said in a light tone, "If I don't join Dad and Aboji before they wake up, they'll be mad at me for staying up all night."

Without protest, Faylinn and Dasha scrambled off her legs and back into their beds, tucking themselves in. Lily kissed them on the forehead and spoke a silent blessing over them, then did the same with Naima who was still sleeping. [/Good night, my darlings./]

She smiled as the twins sent a warm [//Good night, Ma,/] back to her.

John awoke when he heard movement in the room. He was lying behind Luke, spooned around him, just like he'd been when they'd fallen asleep. Lifting his head, he could just make out a silhouette getting undressed in the reddish light of hyperspace, and felt Lily's presence. [//Hey,/] he sent gently, then continued jokingly, [//We were lonely without you.//]

He could just make out Lily's smile as she walked nearer, now naked, but she remained standing next to the bed for a moment. He frowned. [//Is everything all right?//]

John heard Lily take a deep breath. [//I think so. At least with me.//] She paused, then asked hesitatingly, [//Do you... do you think that...//] A soft sigh, then Lily spoke aloud. "Do you think that you'd have noticed if I had a Vorlon inside me?" she finally whispered, her voice and mind full of hope and carefully controlled fear.

John could see his red-haired lover looking out into hyperspace through the window. The question surprised him with its suddenness, but not with its content. He had felt how shocked and afraid Lily had been, when he'd told her about the Vorlon inside Demon. The thought that her sister carried one was bad enough, and the prospect of having one of their torturers inside herself, too...

John thought for a while, then softly spoke, "Yes, I think I would have noticed. Your mind feels different than that of a 'normal', but that's because of the changes the Vorlon made. Even if it were dormant, I would have noticed another presence inside you, if not immediately, then surely by now." He let her feel his conviction, wanting her to be sure that he wasn't just saying this to placate her.

John heard a soft sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"How's Angel?" he asked, quietly.

"She'll be fine. She can't have one of the Vorlons inside her, since it surely would have attacked once they tried to attach the Keeper. As for Ilas, I doubt it. I don't have proof or even evidence, but I doubt it. The dream I had after we had the Centauri on the ship... I think it has something to do with this."

"And Demon?" John flinched as he felt a flash of pain from Lily.

"She's being Demon--'Tough it out and don't let anyone help'--as usual." John could feel that Lily's anger and bitterness weren't directed at her sister, but at those who had done this to her. "For a long time, there will be moments when I look at her and think of IT. But it will pass. Whether she has a Vorlon inside her or not, Demon has always been our sister, taking care of us, and she always will be." The way Lily said the words, they sounded like a vow.

John looked up at her sadly, wishing there was anything he could do to help. [//Well, there is one thing.//]

[//Come on, you need rest.//]

Lily blinked, as if she'd been far away in her thoughts, and turned her head to look at him. Then her eyes wandered to Luke, who was still lying there breathing quietly, and a wave of Lily's pain and guilt washed over John. "I was so happy to have Luke back and so focused on my own fears that I never even asked him

what he'd gone through down on the planet! He must have been to hell and back all alone..." She was unable to go on as tears welled up in her eyes.

John sat up, reaching out to squeeze her hand with his. [Lily, you had the children and your sisters to worry about too! And Luke wasn't alone when he finally let it all out.] He let her glimpse some of what had happened, then smiled gently. "That's the advantage of living in a triad. Even if one of us needs to go off on our own, the others are never alone."

"Don't talk about being alone, when we only just got back together again," a muffled voice said suddenly. John looked down to see Luke roll onto his back, looking up at him, then at Lily, who lowered her eyes, sniffing

"Lily, please look at me," Luke whispered softly, and after a moment, Lily did, shyly, as if she was afraid of what she would see. "I love you, Fire-Lily." Luke opened his arms, and Lily threw herself into them, burying her head in his shoulder.

"I love you too, Sad Eyes. I was so afraid we'd lost you."

"So was I!" When she lifted her head, Luke kissed her fiercely, their lips expressing more about their emotions in silence than they could have speaking a thousand words, and John put his arms around them both, joining their minds. Letting each other know how horrible the past couple of days had been for them and how happy they were that they were still together, they finally fell asleep, as one.

The doors to his quarters opened, and Gideon entered quietly. The rooms were in silence, and for a brief moment, he wondered whether there was anyone there. Had Deborah taken Marcus somewhere? Gideon felt a moment of panic at the thought that his wife might have moved out of their quarters, taking their son with her. Then he heard the soft sound of breathing, and a wave of relief washed over him. Moving to the sofa, he looked down to see Deborah curled up, fast asleep, with Marcus wrapped in her arms.

Gideon stood silently watching them for a few moments, wondering what he would do if he lost them. These two people had changed his life completely. He knew that he had been on a downward slope into bitterness, regret and depression when he had first met Deborah. The stresses of the Captain's job, and the mission to find a cure for the Drakh plague, had been driving him further and further away from everyone around him, increasingly isolating him from human contact, and with it, his own humanity and compassion. Between them, Deborah and Marcus had brought him back to a place where he was happy. The prospect of life without them was unthinkable.



The Captain closed his eyes for a moment, then went to sit at the dining table, where he could watch the most important people in his life. It was late afternoon ship's time, he hadn't slept properly for nearly thirty-six hours and he was exhausted, but he needed a little time to think, to consider the events of the day.

When Gideon had arrived on the bridge early that morning, Jackson had taken him through the transmissions they had detected. Working with Dunall, his chief linguist, they had identified the language as Drakh. What they could pick up from the broken transmissions indicated that a Drakh fleet was in

pursuit of the Excalibur, having realized that they'd been tricked, and that the fleet of Earthforce destroyers supposedly coming to the Excalibur's aid was a fiction. Gideon had ordered full power to engines and had stayed on the bridge until they had outrun the enemy. Not for the first time, he sent a mental thanks to the engineers who had built the Excalibur, for having made her a little faster than anything else in space or hyperspace.

When Matheson came back on duty after a day's sleep, Gideon had finally agreed to leave the bridge, well aware that once or twice Jackson had 'accidentally' nudged him when he'd dozed off in the Captain's chair. It shouldn't have surprised him that Deborah was asleep on his return to their quarters. She'd had even less rest than he had during the previous night.

Gideon continued to gaze at the slumbering pair, examining every line of their faces, noticing absently that Deborah's blonde curls were only a shade darker than Marcus' and that his son's hair was as curly as his mother's, even though they kept it cut short. Letting it grow led to tangles, as well as tears at bedtime, when they tried to brush those tangles out. Gideon allowed his mind to wander, remembering events in their lives together, happy moments, laughter, smiles and love, as well as the times when he and Deborah had clashed, and the temper tantrums Marcus sometimes threw when he didn't get his own way.

The Captain treasured every moment and every memory. He decided he wanted a lifetime of such moments, and he was willing to fight for them. He wanted a future with his wife and son as well as a past, and he would do whatever was needed, take as long as it took, to make that happen.

Standing wearily, Gideon moved over to the couch, and lifted Marcus gently from Deborah's arms, trying not to wake either the child or his mother. Resting Marcus' head against his shoulder, the Captain carried his son through to the bedroom, and quietly put him in his bed, pulling the covers over him, and kissing his forehead as he whispered, "Sweet dreams."

When he returned to the living room, Gideon found that Deborah was sitting up on the sofa, rubbing sleep from her eyes. He spoke softly, and her face froze instantly. The impassive mask she wore when she was tightly controlling her feelings descended over her face, and Gideon was again seized by fear that he might lose her. He was terrified that the experiences of the previous day, combined with his outburst of temper in Medbay, might drive Deborah away from him. The thought of losing her sent a surge of grief sweeping through him.

Demon heard the voice, the voice she loved, saying, "I'm sorry." It was her first awareness that Matthew had returned to their quarters. After leaving Angel's room, she had gone into the crèche to collect her son and brought him back to their rooms. During the next few hours, Demon had tried to send reassuring feelings to Marcus, hoping that he wouldn't sense her despair. Much to her relief, although Marcus had seemed restless and irritable, he appeared fully recovered from his bad experience during the battle.

Since returning to her quarters, Demon had used everything she knew, everything John had taught her, to block out the emotions around her. She couldn't cope with her own feelings, how could she deal with other people's? So she had remained unaware of Matthew's return until he spoke. Demon schooled her face into a frozen mask and looked up slowly.

She could see the sorrow and pain on Matthew's face and wondered what had caused it. Had he lost more of his crew? He always held himself responsible for every death and injury, always felt he should have done more to prevent it, always felt guilty. It was one of the many facets of Matthew's personality that Demon loved. She whispered, "For what?" as she strengthened her shields further, not wanting to know

how he felt, just in case he was still angry, still disgusted by her neglect of their son.

"I shouldn't have got angry, and I shouldn't have yelled at you. You had a traumatic day. I shouldn't have expected..."

Demon interrupted her husband before he could continue, pushing down her despair that he made no attempt to hold her or touch her, convinced that this was another sign of how he must hate what he now knew her to be. "We all had a traumatic day. You thought you were going to die horribly, but you came back and did your job: you saved the ship. Luke thought he was going to die, too, but he came back and did his job, going straight into Medbay to help Angel. All I had to do was to be there for Marcus, and I couldn't even get that right. You had every right to be angry. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Matthew went to speak, but Demon held up her hand to stop him. "Let me finish." She had thought through what she needed to say, and she knew that if she didn't get it all out, she would break down and weep, begging him to forgive her, pleading with him to still love her. Demon didn't want to put that pressure on her husband. It felt too much like emotional blackmail. So she held herself stiffly upright, kept her face expressionless and continued.

"None of this would have happened if Angel and I had obeyed your orders. Regardless of any other relationship we have with you, you are the Captain of this ship and you have the right to expect us to do as you command. We both failed you. If we were members of your crew, you would have every right to throw us off this ship..."

Demon's voice cracked slightly, as Matthew whispered, "Deborah, don't..." She swallowed quickly and went on.

"Please believe me when I tell you that I'll do everything I can to make sure this never happens again. I hope that one day you might bring yourself to trust me again. I'm sorry. That's it really. I'm just very, very sorry."

Gideon knelt at Deborah's feet and took her hands in his, kissing them gently, before looking up into her frozen face. "Please, let's leave this alone. Can we put all that behind us, and go on from here? I love you, Deborah. That hasn't and never will change. I know I'm a grouch sometimes, and I say stupid things that I don't really mean, but can you forgive me? Please?"

Deborah's face remained frozen as she looked back at him. "There's nothing to forgive, Matthew. You've done nothing wrong, it's me. I'm just..." Her voice trailed off and her gaze drifted over his shoulder and became unfocused.

Gideon squeezed her hands to regain her attention and watched as she dragged her eyes back to his face. She licked her dry lips and whispered, "I need a little time, that's all, just a little time." Gideon wanted to weep at the flat emotionless tone of her voice. He knew that his wife needed a lot more than time, to help her get over what had happened on Centauri Prime. She needed professional help and counseling, but he feared that she would resist all attempts to help her, insisting that she could handle it herself. That, after all, was what Gideon would do in Deborah's situation, and they were two of a kind.

Leaning forward, Gideon went to pull his wife into his arms, wanting and needing to hold her close, to make her feel how much he loved her. He might as well have tried to hug a block of ice. Deborah didn't move or bend, and as Gideon leaned back to look at her, he caught the brief flare of panic that crossed her

face. He dropped his head to his hands, which still clutched hers tightly, wondering what he could do to save his marriage. Deborah gently freed one of her hands, and Gideon felt her stroking his hair, as he knelt with his head in her lap. She wasn't sending, so he couldn't be sure of what she was feeling, but that tiny gesture gave him hope. Maybe there was a way back, a way to recapture what they'd had. Maybe she hadn't withdrawn from him completely.

Gideon lifted his head and was about to speak, when he saw Deborah turn her head toward the bedroom door. A split second later, he heard Marcus start to cry. Standing quickly, he released his wife's hand and followed her as she rushed into their son's bedroom. Gideon stood in the doorway and watched, as she lifted the child from his bed and rocked him gently, whispering to him, soothing and calming him. Cursing himself for an idiot, the Captain wondered again how he could ever have thought that Deborah would deliberately neglect their son when he was hurt.

Marcus' crying slowly abated under his mother's soothing, and from what Gideon could tell, the distress had been caused by nothing more than waking up to find that Deborah had gone. He watched as Deborah turned to face him, still stroking their son's head as she held him.

"Matthew, you look exhausted. Why don't you take a nap, and I'll call you for dinner later?" Deborah's words would have been reassuring, if they hadn't been delivered in a flat monotone, indicating that she was still controlling herself rigidly.

Gideon sighed, too tired to deal with all the obstacles he could see ahead, worn down by too many hours of fear, adrenaline, and making decisions on which too many lives depended. He desperately wanted to fix things between him and his wife right then and there, but he knew it was going to take a long time to bring Deborah back from where she had retreated. Gideon told himself to be patient, to give her a little time and space, and maybe she'd let him help her.

"Thanks. If you're sure you don't need any help with Marcus..." He trailed off as Deborah shook her head.

"We'll be fine." She kissed the blond curls on Marcus' head as she held him. "I'll call you in a couple of hours."

Gideon nodded and turned, walking through his old living quarters, through the connecting door into the living area he and Deborah now occupied, and through into their bedroom. Stripping quickly, he dropped his clothes on the floor and fell into their bed. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

Leaning back from his desk, Gideon stretched to ease the kinks in his back, caused by bending forward, reading reports. He glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was just before midnight, ship's time.

The Captain closed his tired eyes, gritty from too much reading and not enough sleep, telling himself that he shouldn't avoid the inevitable; he would have to go to bed sometime. He almost laughed to himself. If it hadn't been tragic, it would have been funny. Gideon couldn't remember another day in the last three years when he hadn't been eager to climb into bed with his wife. If anything, they spent time in bed together when they ought to be doing other things, but their mutual desire and passion for each other had always meant that a lazy afternoon's love making was preferable to any other activity.

Now Gideon was dreading what awaited him in the bedroom, and he had been avoiding the issue for two hours, by going over damage reports and crew rosters that could easily have waited until morning.

Dinner had been a largely silent affair, apart from Marcus' whining. The child had looked back and forth between his parents, becoming increasingly fractious, as he'd picked up the tension between them. By the time the meal had ended, with neither Gideon nor Deborah having done more than pick at their food, Marcus had been ready for a full blown temper tantrum, which he'd proceeded to throw when Deborah tried to get him ready for his bath.

Gideon had offered to help, as Deborah struggled with the screaming child, but she had refused in that same, soft, flat, monotonous voice that the Captain had come to hate. Gideon had quietly cleared the dinner table and put the dishes in the sterilizer, while Deborah had battled with their son. Eventually, she had reappeared holding Marcus, who was now dressed in his pajamas, still screaming his head off. She had stood in the doorway connecting Gideon's old quarters to their new rooms, and she had spoken quietly.

"I'm sorry, Matthew. Can you take him? I don't seem to be coping very well..." Deborah's words had trailed off as Gideon lifted the screaming child from her arms. Her face was still frozen, and Gideon wondered what she was thinking and feeling behind the god-awful mask she had put on.

The Captain remembered smiling gently at his wife, as he'd rocked Marcus in his arms, trying to quiet the screams. "It's OK. You've had a lousy couple of days. Let me help for a while. It's about time I did my famous impersonation of a father, anyway. I don't do it often enough." He tried to make a joke to cover his deep concern.

Deborah had looked back at him, still expressionless as she whispered, "We've all had a lousy couple of days, Matthew. That's no excuse. I'm sorry." Then she'd walked slowly into their bedroom and pulled the screen doors closed behind her.

Gideon hadn't seen her since. He'd gradually quieted Marcus' screams, finally getting the child to tell him why he was so upset. Marcus' words had nearly broken Gideon's heart. "Mummy doesn't love me any more."

The Captain had hugged his son tightly, telling him over and over that it wasn't true, that his mother loved him more than anything else in the universe, but that she was very unhappy just then, so she wasn't able to tell him herself. Marcus had eventually seemed to accept what his father was saying, and soon thereafter had cried himself to sleep. Returning to his desk after putting his son to bed, Gideon had sat for a while, head in hands, wondering whether life could ever be the same, before distracting himself with work.

Leaning back in his chair, Gideon stared at the papers scattered across his desk, mulling over the implications behind them. His mission had failed totally. Far from bringing the Centauri back into the ISA, the events of the last few days had widened the breach between them even further. To make things worse, the Excalibur had been damaged and members of his crew had died, because their Captain hadn't been quick enough to get them out of the trap set by the Centauri.

Gideon blamed himself for every life lost and every scratch and dent on the Excalibur's hull. He'd taken a few moments earlier in the day to dictate letters to his dead crewmembers' next of kin, and every letter had been agony. [If I'd been quicker, smarter, more intuitive, a better Captain, then maybe they'd still be alive.]

He'd lost crew before and dealt with it, but in the last three years, Gideon had become accustomed to having Deborah at his side, sharing his sense of loss, providing him with the comfort and support to go on. Not having her there, not being able to lean on her, to feel her arms around him, to feel her love and

confidence flowing through him, left Gideon feeling adrift and depressed.

The Captain sighed deeply. This wasn't the time to start his report to Sheridan. He had another three days before they would be in range of Minbar. He had plenty of time to put his report together. For now, it was time to go to bed.

Gideon walked through to the bedroom he shared with his wife, opening the screen doors quietly. The lights in the room were out, but he could see enough from the light behind him to make out a huddled form on the far side of the bed. Deborah had curled up as far away from the door as she could get, pressing herself into a corner of the bed. The bedclothes covered her completely, only a few of her golden curls showing at the edges of the blanket. Gideon had never known her to sleep in that position before. Usually she sprawled across the bed, more often than not with the covers thrown back.

Gideon undressed silently, and slid into the bed as quietly as he could, but as he tried to pull some of the covers over himself, he felt Deborah stir. He could just make out the white oval of her face, as she lifted it from under the blanket to look at him. Her eyes looked enormous, and her face showed the same expressionless mask she'd worn earlier.

Whispering, "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Gideon reached out to take his wife into his arms. As soon as his hand touched her she froze, and an expression of sheer panic flitted across her face, before she schooled her features into their previous impassivity. Gideon withdrew his hand quickly, muttering, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... Deborah, what's wrong? Please tell me. We need to talk about this."

Deborah shook her head, her face still a frozen mask. "I can't, not yet. I'm sorry, I just can't..." Her whispers ran down into incoherent mumbling, and Gideon went to reach out to her again, desperate to comfort her, to try to help her through her pain.

Deborah flinched again, and moved down the bed away from him. As she slid off the end of the bed, Gideon could see that she had her robe wrapped tightly around her. He couldn't remember another occasion when either of them had worn anything in bed. She stood for a moment, staring at him in silence, then whispered, "I'll go and sleep on the sofa. Just for tonight. I'll be better tomorrow, I'm sure I will, I just need a little time."

Gideon threw back the covers and climbed out of bed, shaking his head. "Go back to bed." Grabbing his own robe from the wardrobe, he pulled it on. "I'll get Marcus, and he can sleep in here with you for tonight. I'll go sleep in my old bunk." As he walked out of the bedroom, Gideon desperately hoped that Deborah would call him back, that she'd say something, anything, to stop him.

The silence at his back was the worst thing he'd ever heard in his life.

Demon stood, frozen in place, as the man she loved more than life itself walked out of the door. She desperately wanted to yell, scream, beg him not to leave her, tell him that she loved him and couldn't live without him, but she didn't dare. To do that she would have to relax the iron control she had maintained over herself since arriving back on the Excalibur, and Demon knew that if she relaxed that control, then the monster inside her might escape.

She watched in silence as Matthew carried Marcus back into their room, and gently lowered him to their bed, pulling the covers over the sleeping child, and kissing his forehead.

As Matthew straightened, he looked at his wife and spoke quietly. "Deborah, take as much time as you need. I can wait as long as it takes. Just try to remember that I'll always be here for you. I love you."

Demon's control over her empathic powers slipped a little as Matthew spoke, and for a moment she felt his love. She was almost ready to let go, to throw herself into his arms and beg him to help her, when his emotions shifted. As her husband looked at her, Demon felt his love replaced by fear. He was scared of her and what she'd become. No matter how much he tried to mean what he said, he couldn't get beyond that fear.

Matthew turned and left the bedroom, as Demon stood silently clenching her fists at her side, driving her nails into the palms of her hands, determined not to lose control. She didn't blame Matthew for his fear; she entirely understood it. She was frightened herself, frightened of what she had become and what she could do. Demon climbed back into her bed and curled up next to her son, her mind racing.

[Mustn't relax must control can't let it out let it escape to hurt Matthew Marcus my sisters everyone anyone mustn't hurt must control. Lost control on the planet lost control and it attacked came out and attacked Angel could have killed Angel must control can't relax. Love Matthew love Marcus if Matthew makes love to me I'll lose control lose control and it will escape and hurt him mustn't lose control mustn't make love to Matthew love Matthew love Marcus love my sisters mustn't lose control.]

Demon's head ached with the anguish of her thoughts and her lack of alternatives. She could see no way out of her current hell. Everyone she loved feared her, and she felt more alone than she had ever done in her life before. Reaching out, she stroked her son's golden curls as he lay sleeping next to her.

[Love you never leave you were hurt and I wasn't there bad mother bad wife bad sister useless no use to anyone...] Her thoughts drifted into an uneasy sleep, filled with nightmares of standing in the middle of a palace made of ice, facing a Vorlon. Alone.

The Appeal

Galen sat in his ship, lights dimmed, glowering at the control sphere hovering in front of him. He was rarely indecisive, but the information he had just learned on the Excalibur was of such significance that for once he found himself unable to arrive at a conclusion. [What to do? Who to tell?]



Should he tell his seniors in the Technomage order that one of their oldest and most dangerous enemies was still at large in the galaxy? Would they believe him? Would they act on his information? How would any action they took impact on his relations with the humans? While he no longer thought of the Excalibur as his 'home', Galen had to some extent rebuilt his relationships with her Captain and crew over the previous three years, despite the Captain's marriage to a witch. He could see no way in which his relationships could continue unaffected by the knowledge that the witch was inhabited and controlled by the worst enemy of his order.

Galen sighed deeply. There had been a time when he had counted Gideon as one of his few friends, but that friendship had become strained over the years. This last piece of information could break the final bonds between them.

The Technomage decided that he needed to consult before he acted, and there was only one person in the galaxy to whom he could speak freely about his new knowledge.

"Ship, contact Alwyn."

He gave the command and settled back to wait, instructing his ship to entertain him with music until contact was made.

Alwyn looked at the image of Galen, projected above the table in his 'study'. The room was his favorite part of his ship and he still spent many hours there, reading, studying, and using his instruments and equations to watch the universe. He thought himself fortunate that he required little sleep these days, as the demands his partner and son made on his time would otherwise have left him with little opportunity for his own pursuits.

The Technomage smiled as he thought about Sarah and Jaysen. At eighteen months old, his son was showing signs of precocity, already speaking in full sentences, communicating with Ishtar and her still unnamed and unsexed offspring, even learning how to use the light ball that controlled Alwyn's ship. The Technomage had been forced to voice code the command structure of the ship, after Jaysen had taken them all on an unexpected, and fortunately uneventful, tour of the solar system.

Alwyn was content with his life, and the last thing he needed at that moment was Galen rocking the boat. The only time Galen ever made contact was when he had bad news. Alwyn wondered just how Galen planned to rain on his parade today. "Damn it, I should have brought an umbrella," growled the old man.

There was an answering chirp from his pocket, and the old mage growled again. "You would think as my familiar, that you could remind me to bring the umbrella."

He listened carefully as Galen described what he had learned on the Excalibur. How the Captain, his wife, her sister and the doctor had been held prisoner on Centauri Prime and how they had escaped. While Galen talked, Alwyn sighed quietly to himself. If only Gideon had asked about the situation on Centauri Prime, Alwyn could have told him that his mission was hopeless. The Technomages had long known about the Drakh infesting that planet, and the Keepers they used to maintain control of key people there. Alwyn was deeply ashamed that his order had at one time been numbered among the allies of the Drakh and Shadows. Not that he thought the Vorlons were any better. As far as Alwyn was concerned, the Galaxy was a better place without the older races.

As Galen concluded his tale, Alwyn sighed again. He wondered what poor Demon must be going through, knowing that she had such a creature inside her. The Technomage was fond of the tall blonde and her maverick husband. He dreaded to think what they must be suffering because of their discovery.

Alwyn snapped out of his reverie when Galen spoke vehemently, saying, "I am undecided, Alwyn. Should I go ahead and execute the witch myself, or should I advise the order, so they can decide on the best method of destruction? If I could be sure that the Vorlon would be destroyed when I kill her, I would have no hesitation..."

"STOP!" Alwyn bellowed at the image hovering in the center of his room. "Execute? Destroy? Kill? What right do you have to condemn this poor woman? She is a victim of the Vorlon and deserves our pity and help, not our condemnation. Galen, you go too far! Did Elric train you no better than this? Are you no

more than a medieval witch hunter, ready to burn at the stake anyone you don't understand? And do you have no feelings, no anxiety over what this discovery must be doing to your friend, Gideon and to his son?" Alwyn's fury dragged him to his feet as he harangued the silent image.

Galen sat, stony faced and silent, in the face of Alwyn's attack. When the older Technomage finally ran out of words, Galen spoke quietly. "I should have known better than to discuss this with you. I won't trouble you again."

Alwyn saw him turn to terminate the contact and called out, quickly, "Wait! There is another matter we need to discuss. The nanomites you used to cure Angel. I understand why you felt it necessary to use them to save her, but have you considered the implications?" Galen raised an eyebrow in inquiry and Alwyn continued. "Isn't it likely that the medical staff on the Excalibur might just wonder why Technomage nanomites work against Keepers? They could ask difficult questions and arrive at inconvenient conclusions, if they study those nanomites too closely."

The younger Technomage nodded, "I know, but it was the only way. Without a transfusion from me, they could never have freed her from the Keeper." Despite the cool, unemotional expression on Galen's face, Alwyn could tell that the idea of Angel suffering that fate appalled the younger man.

"I understand, but you should be ready for their questions, and have answers prepared. Good ones. Doctor Raven is quite bright, you know. He will soon be wondering why the Technomages carry their own internal defense against Keepers. He may even suspect that we have known of those abhorrent creatures for centuries and have developed a protection against them being used on us."

Galen nodded. "I know, but in another few days, the nanomites will die off without the implants to control them and encourage them to reproduce. I'll go back to the Excalibur soon and if he asks, I'll tell Raven that Angel's own immune system has deleted the nanomites from her body. He will have no way to prove or disprove what I say. If he has taken samples in the meantime, he will find they have disappeared."

Alwyn nodded his approval of Galen's plan. "Good, but when you return to the Excalibur, leave the Captain's wife alone! She and Gideon will have enough problems without a Technomage conducting a witch hunt. Leave it, Galen."

Galen's face was utterly expressionless as he terminated the communication. Alwyn sighed again. He'd hoped to spend some time with Sarah and Jaysen, but now it looked as if he would need to use that time to set up some protection spells around Demon. He thought briefly about making a quick trip to visit the Excalibur and rejected the idea. That might work in the short term, but as soon as he left, Galen would be free to attack. No, he would have to set up something more enduring.

Alwyn shook his head as he said softly to himself, "Galen, my boy, you have no idea how much I wish your parents had lived to raise you, and that Elric had never got his hands on you."

The Technomage sighed sadly and started work.

Angel curled up on the chair in her quarters and cried. She had been allowed to leave Medbay an hour before, and Lily had come to take her back to her rooms, bringing clothes for Angel to change into, then staying with her for a little while, until Angel chased her sister out.

"Shoo now, I'll be fine and you have your own family to look after." Angel had smiled and ushered her

little sister out of the door. She had then slumped in a chair and held her head in her hands, trying to fight back tears. Lily had come to take her home, but there had been no sign of Demon.

Angel's big sister had dutifully visited Medbay every day, sitting silently by Angel's bedside, her face an expressionless mask. When Angel had tried to question Demon, to get her to talk about what had happened and how they could deal with it, Demon had just said, "There's nothing to talk about, darling. Please, leave it alone. I'm just a little tired," then retreated into silence.

Angel knew it wasn't 'nothing'. She knew that Demon was struggling with the knowledge that she had a Vorlon, or at least part of one, inside her. She knew the anguish that this was causing her older sister, and Angel knew it was all her fault. Everything was Angel's fault. Demon's pain, the damage to the Excalibur, the dead crewmen whose bodies she had seen being taken into the cryogenic section of Medbay, the look of pain and sorrow she had seen in Gideon's eyes when he had come to visit her. [All my fault. My stupidity and selfishness caused all this.]

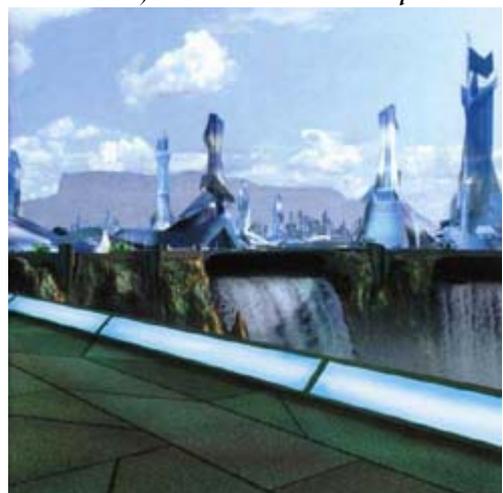
So she started to weep, crying for her sister's pain, the Captain's sorrow, the dead crew and even a little for her own pain and loss. Angel wondered if she would ever learn to trust anyone again. It seemed that every man she trusted let her down.

The sound of the door buzzer distracted her from thoughts of Lucas and Ursa, and Angel called out, "Open."

Luke Raven stood in the doorway, smiling gently. Angel tried to return the smile, but her face crumpled and she started to sob again. The next thing she knew, she was being held in Luke's arms and he was rocking her, whispering reassurances to her, telling her that everything was going to be all right. Angel found herself believing him. Luke at least was a man she could trust.

"Sit down, Captain." Sheridan waved Gideon to a chair across the desk from him. Their meeting was being held in the President's private office, and Gideon wondered exactly why he'd been called down for this one-on-one meeting. He'd sent his report on the Centauri mission down from orbit and had expected some follow up questions, but not in person, not in Tuzanor again. There was a lot of work needed to repair his ship, and a part of him resented being kept from that work.

Walking through the parks and streets from the shuttle port had brought back memories of the Captain's previous visit to this place. He'd remembered the night he and Deborah had spent in the guest suite of the Sheridans' apartment, a night filled with passion, during which Gideon and his wife had lifted each other to a new level of pleasure and love. As Gideon walked, he had wondered whether they would ever do that for each other again.



He had slept alone in his old bunk every night since leaving Centauri Prime, every night carrying Marcus in to sleep with his mother, every night assuring Deborah that it was all right, that she should take as long as she needed. But it was very far from all right. Every night, Gideon had hidden his feelings of desperation, of pain and loss, of fear that he had lost Deborah forever. She seemed as distant and sad as when they'd left Centauri. As far as Gideon could tell, she wasn't getting better at all.

Now the President wanted to cross-examine him about his report. [Great! Just what I need right now, Mr. President. Go ahead and second-guess every decision I made, why don't you? God knows, I've been doing it enough myself since we left Centauri Prime.]

Sheridan's next words didn't really surprise Gideon. He hadn't really expected to get away with the vagueness of some of his report.

"I'd like you to take me through some parts of your report in more detail, Captain. While I entirely accept your conclusions and recommendations, I would like a little more information on some points."

Gideon nodded, knowing exactly where Sheridan was likely to start picking at his story. He wasn't disappointed.

"Let's start with your escape from the palace. Your report is succinct on this issue, but not exactly forthcoming. To quote..." Sheridan paused, leafing through a hard copy of the report he held in front of him. "Here it is. 'We overpowered the guards and made our escape from the palace and back to the ship.' Full stop." He looked up from his reading and stared at Gideon. "Would you care to tell me how--even supported by your ship's doctor, your wife and her sister, although I doubt if Ms. Denier was much use as you mention that she had been incapacitated by one of these 'Keepers' earlier-- how you managed to overpower five armed guards? When you didn't have any weapons of your own."

Gideon sighed, then couldn't resist the smart mouthed answer. "Talent? Sheer force of personality? The secret penknife I keep hidden in my left boot? Would you go with any of those?"

Sheridan half smiled and shook his head. "Not a chance. I want the whole story, Captain, not the expurgated version for the kiddy crowd."

*Gideon took a moment to compose himself, working out just how much to tell as he stared out of the window of Sheridan's office, over the beautiful city of Tuzanor to the mountains beyond. He arrived at a conclusion. He'd never found it easy to trust, had never known who to trust, but the Captain decided that if he couldn't trust Sheridan, then there was no one left who *could* be trusted.*

He started his tale, telling Sheridan how the Vorlon had emerged from Deborah to attack the guards and the Keepers, how it had reentered her, how Vir had come to guide them out of the palace and how Galen had arrived to take them from the planet. Gideon then answered Sheridan's question about how Galen had been called, telling the President of the link between the sisters, and for the first time ever, letting someone outside his immediate family know what his wife and her sisters really were. He told Sheridan of their origin, how they'd been adapted by the Vorlon, and what powers they had.

When Gideon finally finished, Sheridan sat back in his chair, eyes closed, silent as he pondered everything he had just been told. Gideon waited, wondering exactly how the President would react to the story.

Sheridan finally opened his eyes and stared across the desk at the Captain of the Excalibur. "Whoever forged your wife's identity details into the Earth databanks did a damned good job. We checked her out before you came here last time, and not even my Head of Covert Intelligence spotted her ID as a fake. I'll have to have words with her about that. Care to tell me who was responsible?"

Gideon shook his head and smiled. "Not a chance, Mr. President. If you want to hang someone out to dry for that one, I'm your man."

Sheridan shook his head sadly, grinning as he looked at Gideon. "And I thought we were beginning to trust each other, Captain." The smile disappeared as he continued, "I just find it hard to believe that there's still part of a Vorlon left on this side of the Rim. I don't understand how they could have left any of them behind. It can't have been an accident; they were too damned powerful and omniscient to make that kind of mistake."

Gideon narrowed his eyes as he looked across at the President, now leaning back in his chair to ponder this new conundrum. An idea came into Gideon's mind, something he hadn't thought of before. He asked, "You knew some of the Vorlons, didn't you? When you were on B5."

Sheridan sat upright and leaned forward, clasping his hands together on his desk. "I only really knew one. His name was Kosh and he was the Vorlon ambassador to Babylon 5. He...died."

Gideon caught the hesitation before the final word and had to ask, "How?"

The look he received from the President made him wonder whether he was going to get a reply, but finally Sheridan said softly, "He was killed by the Shadows, because he did me a favor. It was the right thing to do, but the price was high, for him and for me. What I didn't know then was that Kosh had left a small part of himself inside me. That became critical when I came back from Za'Ha'Dum. Without that part of Kosh, we could never have destroyed the new Vorlon ambassador, and never have completed our plans to rid the galaxy of the older races."

The Captain found it hard to contain his excitement at what he was hearing. "So you carried part of a Vorlon inside you? Like Deborah is doing now?"

Sheridan sighed and shook his head, "Yes and no. Yes, I carried a part of Kosh around for a while without knowing, but not like your wife. I was never harmed by the Vorlons as she was. I didn't hate them until the end, when we finally realized what they were doing to the younger races. What they did to your wife and her sisters, they did on a galactic scale to the younger races. Used us, bred us for their own purposes, tried to manipulate us to be their weapons in a war that had nothing to do with us."

Gideon wasn't interested in that part of Sheridan's story; he had only one interest now. "So how did you get it out? How did you get this Kosh to leave you?"

He could see from the sad look on the President's face that there was no easy answer. Sheridan described how Kosh had left him, to fight and destroy the new Vorlon ambassador to B5. "I'm sorry, Gideon, but Kosh left of his own volition. I'm not aware of anything that could force a Vorlon out into the open, if they don't want to emerge. Maybe Lorien could have done it, but I doubt if anyone else has the power."

"Who was Lorien? How did he do that, and is there anyway I can contact him?" Gideon tried to keep the desperation out of his voice, but the look of sorrow on Sheridan's face showed him that he hadn't entirely succeeded.

Sheridan shook his head sadly, and explained that Lorien was the first of the First Ones, who had gone beyond the Rim with the Shadows and the Vorlons.

Gideon put on his best poker face to hide his disappointment. He promised himself that he'd find a way. Somehow, he'd find a way to free his wife. Finally, he broke the silence that had developed in the office, as Sheridan had allowed him time to come to terms with that unpalatable truth.

"OK, back to business. What I didn't put in the report that I sent on ahead, because I didn't want to entrust it to a transmission, even a coded one, was the involvement in our escape of Vir Cotto. He made three requests before we left, and I promised myself that I'd do my best to help him. First, he wanted us to send someone called G'Kar to Centauri Prime. Is that possible?"

Sheridan shook his head, slowly. "I have no idea where G'Kar is right now, but I'll get the Rangers to keep a look out for him and pass the message on. Although G'Kar's previous experiences on Centauri Prime weren't exactly pleasant, so I don't know if he would be willing to go, even if we can find him. And given the situation there, I'm not sure I'd want him to go. Did Vir say why he wanted G'Kar?"

Gideon shrugged. "To free Emperor Mollari. Whatever that means. OK, the next thing he wanted was a liaison with the Rangers, to help him build the Centauri resistance to the Drakh rule. Can you help with that?"

Sheridan nodded, vehemently. "I'll ask Delemn, but I'm sure she'll agree. And I know just the man to send. Marcus Cole knows Vir and will be the perfect liaison. One thing though, Captain. You were on B5 when Marcus was 'revived'. Did you ever hear how that happened? I never did get a straight story from Marcus about it."

Gideon maintained his poker face. Even with the information Sheridan now had about the witches' powers, he decided that the least said about that incident the better. Shaking his head, Gideon said, "I never heard the details, no." And that was the truth. Angel never had told him exactly how she and her sisters had brought Marcus Cole back to life, and Deborah wouldn't say a word either. He hurried on before the President could question him further.

"Vir's last request was for information about an old friend of his, a Minbari aide called Lennier. Could your Ranger take Vir information about Lennier when he goes to Centauri Prime?"

This time Sheridan's face showed a mixture of sorrow and anger. Gideon wondered what history existed between the President and the Minbari to produce such an expression, but before he could ask, Sheridan replied. "He's dead."

The two words were delivered in such a way that Gideon knew that was the end of all discussion on the subject. He couldn't help wondering how the Minbari had died, but it was obvious that Sheridan didn't want to say more. Gideon said quietly, "Vir will be sorry about that. He seemed to miss his friend."

Sheridan maintained a frozen expression and said nothing. After a few moments of silence, Gideon asked, "What about the Emperor's request for the cure to the Drakh plague? Despite everything that happened, I think Mollari was doing his best to warn us away, without it being too obvious to his Keeper. If we were to give them the details of the cure, it would give the Drakh one less hold over the Centauri. That, and Vir's resistance, may one day be enough to break them free. The way things stand right now, I can't see many other possibilities. For the foreseeable future at least, the Centauri are not going to be rejoining the ISA."

The President nodded his agreement. "I'll arrange for Marcus to get the details to Vir. Then we'll do whatever we can to help the Centauri people break themselves loose from their masters. Only they can do it."

Sheridan's head dropped, and for a moment, Gideon could see his weariness. He wondered how much longer the President could keep carrying the burdens of that office, and who could replace him when he

decided to retire. The way he looked at that moment, Gideon thought it might not be long before that day came.



The silence lengthened until Gideon finally cleared his throat and asked, "Is there anything else, Mr. President."

Sheridan seemed to pull himself out of the reverie he'd sunk into and smiled across at Gideon. "Just one thing, and this is an order. It will take a few days to patch up the Excalibur and get her back to 100% operational status. During that time, you'll take shore leave." He overrode Gideon's protest. "You keep telling everyone that your First Officer is ready for a command

of his own, so let him prove it. Take your wife and child away for a break. In fact, I have the perfect place for you to take them."

Sheridan went on to describe the house built for the Entil'zha at the Ranger compound in the hills above Tuzanor, and how he and Deleenn rarely used it. "You can do me a favor and take David up there with you. He's always pestering us to be allowed to visit the Rangers training compound. He's determined to be a Ranger when he grows up. David will take care of your son, and give you and your wife some time together. Ever since my son met yours, he's been telling his mother and me how much he'd like a little brother. You can do us all a favor, and see how he likes playing the role of big brother and baby-sitter for a few days. It might just shut him up." The President smiled at Gideon, who knew when he was being manipulated, but decided that this time he'd play along.

"Thank you, Mr. President. That would be perfect." He started to rise to leave the office, but Sheridan stopped him before he made it to the door.

"Captain, Deleenn and I owe you a lot, and part of what we owe you is an apology. We wanted you to take your wife with you on this mission, as we knew of her abilities, and thought she might be able to learn more about what Londo was really feeling than anyone else. We knew there would be risks involved, but neither of us ever anticipated...well, if we'd known what was going to happen..." Sheridan ran out of words.

Gideon pushed down the surge of anger he felt at the President's words. He knew it didn't really matter what Sheridan and Deleenn had wanted, as Deborah would never have agreed to be left behind. He told the President as much and left his office quietly. As he walked back through the parks of Tuzanor toward the shuttle port, Gideon wondered if a few days off the ship, somewhere peaceful where they could talk, would be enough to start Deborah's healing process. He could only hope it would.

The Emperor sat on his throne, contemplating the past and future. Not that he had a lot of choice in the matter; he had been sitting on his throne for two days, unable to move or to speak, to eat or to drink. A classic Drakh punishment for having failed to deliver what they had ordered, in this case the destruction of the Excalibur and the death of her Captain and crew.

Mollari felt that the punishment was worth it, and if the Drakh had known everything he knew, they would have punished him far more severely. Choices. It all came down to choices. He remembered talking to G'Kar many years before and telling him that when he had first gone to Babylon 5, he had no power and many choices. Once he became Emperor, Londo had thought he had all the power in the world, and no choices left at all. He'd been wrong. Once the Keeper had been attached to him, Mollari had found that

he had almost no power, but still a few choices remained. He had found ways to select alternatives, found ways to make progress toward his hidden objectives, despite his lack of power. The Emperor could only hope that his judgment of what options to choose had improved.

He thought back on the moment when he has awoken to find himself strapped down to his throne, his Drakh master standing before him. The interrogation that had followed had not been pleasant, particularly the part involving the deep scan by the Drakh controlled Centauri telepath. Fortunately, Mollari's memories of the events leading up to the escape of the Earthforce Captain and his people were extremely vague.

He'd remembered having the girl, Angel, brought to the throne room. He'd remembered her sister, Captain Gideon's wife, appearing at the door to the throne room, but he couldn't remember anything after that. From that moment, until Mollari had woken up on his throne, his neck and shoulder throbbing with pain, his memory was pretty much a blank. All he could be sure of was that at some time during that blank period, his Keeper had been destroyed, but he had no idea how or by whom, and the telepath had confirmed that.

The Drakh had decided that the Emperor should be punished anyway. Punished for what he had not done. He had not ordered the fighters pursuing the shuttle to shoot it down, nor had he given orders to the Centauri ships in orbit above the planet to pursue and destroy the Excalibur, when they made their escape. Fortunately, the Drakh had accepted the telepath's word that this had been an oversight. Fortunately, the Drakh had not realized that the telepath they had used to interrogate Mollari had not been entirely honest with them. The telepath was, after all, a Centauri.

So the Drakh had merely kept the Emperor restrained, until the Keeper had grown back sufficiently to reestablish its control over him. Then they had instructed it to keep Mollari immobile for two Centauri days, to think about his neglect of his duties to his masters, and to ponder the consequences of failure. A price well worth paying for everything Mollari felt had been achieved by the Excalibur's visit to Centauri Prime.

The Emperor listed those achievements in his mind as he sat, frozen in place, staring at the curtains in front of him.



Most importantly, Sheridan and Deleenn now knew of the situation that existed on Centauri Prime. They would know that the planet was infested with the Drakh and that the Emperor and the Republic were under their control. This knowledge might temper the ISA's behavior toward the Centauri people in the future. Mollari prayed that it might also make them wary of the gift for their son that he had given to Sheridan and Deleenn, on the last occasion when they had met.

The Emperor hoped that Captain Gideon would ensure the request for details of the cure to the Drakh plague was met. The Captain had seemed a compassionate man, despite his suspicious nature. Mollari would have smiled if he could. It had been hearing of that suspicious nature and Gideon's other achievements, through various members of his court who seemed to have a surprisingly large amount of knowledge about the Captain, which had led the Emperor to suggest to his Drakh masters the whole plan of getting the Excalibur to visit Centauri Prime.

While his courtier had suggested the idea for the trap, Londo had taken the next mental step. He had hoped that Gideon could get in, obtain the information about the Drakh control of the planet, and escape

again. He was sure that no other Earthforce Captain could have achieved that. Not since John Sheridan had left Earthforce, anyway.

Mollari's final hope was that Sheridan would hear and act on his plea for G'Kar to come back to Centauri Prime. Only G'Kar could release him from this nightmare.

The Emperor sat on his throne, thinking, watching the shifting patterns of the sunlight playing across the semi-transparent curtains that concealed the only uncovered window in his palace. He was unable to move physically, but the Drakh could never imprison his mind. Mollari had little left in his life that was good, but he still had hope for his planet and his people. Even the Drakh had been unable to take that away from him.

Gideon walked briskly across the Ranger compound, to the small Minbari temple that the human Rangers called 'The Chapel'. It had been included on the orientation tour that he and Deborah had been given when they had first arrived at the compound, two days earlier. Gideon had noticed that Deborah seemed to relax as they stood within the temple. The beautiful multi-hued windows that ringed the top part of the temple's dome had broken the sunlight into fragments that created spectacular patterns of color on the floor. The silence inside, broken only by the songs of the temshwee and the tinkling of the wind chimes, created a sense of peace and tranquility that had somehow got through the rigidly impassive shell that Deborah had built around herself since leaving Centauri Prime.

For just a moment, Gideon had sensed that his wife had felt safe, secure enough to relax the unyielding control she had maintained through the preceding days. The impression was fleeting, as when he had turned to watch her, Deborah had become aware of his scrutiny, and all her shields had snapped back into place.

In the time since they'd arrived in the compound, David Sheridan had taken Marcus off to show him every aspect of the Ranger training and lifestyle. Gideon half-smiled as he wondered how much his son really understood, but the younger boy had developed a serious case of hero worship for the President's son, and followed gladly wherever the older boy led. Marcus had even abandoned Half-Ted in his eagerness to pursue his new mentor. The Captain could see that breaking the two boys apart would be difficult when the time came to leave. Gideon had no doubt that Half-Ted would be called upon to comfort the inevitable tears. He just hoped that the bear's sole remaining ear would hold up under the strain.

Marcus being fully occupied had given Gideon the time he needed to be with Deborah. Or it would have done, if she hadn't kept slipping away from him every time he turned his back. They had slept in separate rooms within the small house the President and Delenn had loaned them, Marcus still sharing his mother's bed, while Gideon had attempted to sleep on a narrow Minbari cot in the guestroom. The angle of the bed had made sleeping difficult, which had not improved the Captain's temper. Deborah's tendency to disappear when David Sheridan came to collect Marcus had not helped either.

Gideon had eventually tracked his wife down to this small, beautiful temple, and was determined that today they would talk. Today he was going to help her, whether she liked it or not.

In his determination to get into the temple, Gideon nearly bowled over Entil'zha Delenn, as she emerged into the daylight. The President's wife gave him one of her mysterious half-smiles and bowed her head, sliding past him as he tried to apologize for nearly knocking her down. Although Delenn moved with her usual grace, in an instant she had disappeared from view. Gideon shook his head, trying to figure out how anyone could move that fast and still appear unhurried. Then he turned his attention back to 'The

Chapel' and entered quietly.

The silence inside was complete, the solid floor somehow absorbing the sound of Gideon's footsteps, even though it looked as if it were made from plain stone. The gentle breeze that usually blew across the plateau had dropped, stilling the sound of the wind chimes, and even the temshwee had fallen silent. The multi-colored windows broke the light into fragments, every shade of the spectrum represented in the images cast on the floor, but the brightest light was focused on the statue that stood at the center of the Chapel. In front of that statue was a simple stone bench on which Deborah sat, still and silent.

Gideon paused in the doorway, looking at his wife, seeing how the light caught her hair and made each curl a different color. She looked as if she had a rainbow cascading down her back. Deborah was sitting upright, her back straight and her head erect, as she gazed at the statue in front of her, seeming not to have noticed her husband's entrance.

The Captain stood, watching his wife, taking in the way her hair fell around her shoulders, the way her body narrowed at the waist, then swelled at the hips as she sat. He had missed having Deborah lying next to him in bed at night. Without the warmth and softness of her skin next to his, Gideon found that he couldn't sleep. Just as before they had married, he woke several times each night, getting up, pacing the floor, and trying to exhaust himself sufficiently to sleep again. And the nightmares about the Cerberus had returned, but now it was Deborah who moved away from him into the darkness, not the Technomage ships. It was to Deborah he called out, "Don't go!"

Gideon moved quietly across the chapel and sat on the bench next to his wife. She didn't move or speak. She just continued to look at the statue. Her hands rested in her lap, loosely clasped together. Gideon reached out slowly, making sure Deborah could see him move, careful not to startle her, and took her left hand in his right. She didn't try to pull away, but neither did she return the slight squeeze he gave her hand as it rested in his.

The Captain sat silently for a few moments, looking down at the hand he held. Deborah's fingers were long and slender, but had always seemed strong and capable, her nails not long or short, just neatly trimmed, and never painted. As usual, the only jewelry she wore were the rings Gideon had given her. Turning Deborah's hand slightly, Gideon watched as the diamonds in the engagement ring caught the light from the windows and broke it into more multi-hued fragments.

At least she was still wearing his rings. Gideon would never forget the time when she had taken them off and left them behind, when Deborah had walked out on the day of their marriage. He never again wanted to feel as bad as he had when he'd found those rings. The memory alone was enough to make him feel nauseous.

Still moving slowly, giving his wife plenty of time to pull away if she wanted to, Gideon raised Deborah's hand to his lips and kissed it gently. At last, he got a reaction. Deborah turned and looked at him, her face still the frozen mask she had worn since leaving Centauri Prime. Gideon swallowed hard, as he wondered if he would ever see her smile again.

He smiled and spoke softly. "I nearly ran down Delell as I came in. Did you see her?"

Deborah nodded slowly, then licked her lips before speaking so quietly that Gideon could barely hear her. "Yes. She was telling me about him." She turned her head and nodded at the statue in front of them.

Gideon followed her gaze and looked at the statue. It was a larger than life representation of a Minbari

male. The features were regular and bland, an anonymous face, a mixture of every Minbari face he had ever seen. "It's supposed to be Valen, isn't it? I heard that they don't know what he looked like, so they try to make the statues representative of all Minbari."

Deborah nodded and whispered, "So Deleenn was just telling me, but she told me something else, too." She turned her head back to look at her husband.

Gideon continued to hold her hand, but reached out with his left hand to push back a strand of hair that had fallen over her face. Deborah didn't flinch or move, which he took as a positive sign, but neither did she lean into his touch, as she would have done in the past. [Patience, Matt. At least she didn't pull away.] He smiled again. "What else did she tell you?"

"You have to promise not to tell. Deleenn said I could tell you, but no one else."

There was something almost childlike in the way Deborah spoke, and Gideon found himself responding as if to a child. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

A flicker of pain across Deborah's otherwise expressionless face, showed Gideon that he'd said the wrong thing. [Again! If I keep sticking my foot in my mouth like this, I'll digest the damned thing off!]

Deborah started speaking before he could apologize, and in a flat monotone, told him the story of Valen. That he had been a 23rd century human who had been changed by the Vorlons into a Minbari, then had stolen a space station and been sent back in time, to fight in a war a thousand years before.

Gideon shook his head, trying to get used to the idea that the icon of all Minbari had started life as a human being. "Do you know who he was?"

Deborah nodded and said, "Deleenn said he'd once been in charge of Babylon 5. His name was Jeffrey Sinclair."

That knocked the wind right out of Gideon. He stared at his wife in amazement, gripping her hand tightly as he said, "Jeff Sinclair? I don't believe it! He was my flight instructor when I first joined Earthforce. He was the best Starfury pilot I've ever seen. I'd heard he'd disappeared here on Minbar a few years back, but..." He couldn't think of anything else to say. "Are you sure?"

Deborah nodded again. "That's what Deleenn said. She said that Valen had always been known as 'A Minbari not born of Minbari' but it was only during the Shadow War that they came to realize what that meant, and what they had to do. Was he a friend of yours?"

Gideon looked closely at his wife, wondering if he'd heard the merest hint of concern in her voice. If he had, it was the first sign of emotion he'd seen in her for days. He shook his head. "I knew him, but not well. Do you have any idea why Deleenn told you all this? I mean, this information would be dynamite if the Minbari general population found out about it. I can understand why she insisted that you keep it to yourself!"

The color that had crept into Deborah's cheeks as they'd talked drained away, and Gideon was dismayed as he watched his wife retreat back into her shell. When she spoke again, it was in the same emotionless whisper he'd been hearing for days.

"I think she wanted me to know that my sisters and I weren't the only people the Vorlons changed and

used. That they did the same to other people, too. Not because they were cruel or capricious, but because they thought they needed to. It was kind of Delemn to try to reassure me, but it's not the same. Valen...Sinclair didn't have a Vorlon inside him. I know that President Sheridan did for a while, Delemn told me that too, but it's still not the same. That Vorlon had been his friend. This one..." Deborah faltered for a moment, and Gideon wondered if she would continue. He squeezed her hand gently, encouraging her to go on. This was the most she had said in days, and he wanted her to explain how she was feeling. Maybe if he could get Deborah talking, they could find a way out of this mess together.

Deborah licked her lips again and continued, softly, "The thing I have inside me is part of the Vorlon that took my sisters and I away from everything we knew and loved. The thing that caused us great pain then punished us when we wouldn't obey its orders. It's different. I have to make sure that it never gets out of me again. I have to make sure it never hurts anyone again. I have to stay in control." Deborah's head had dropped as she spoke, her hair falling forwards to hide her face. Gideon felt her hand move in his, and she slowly pulled away from him.

When she looked up, her face was a mask again. "I have to stay in control, Matthew. If I don't, it could come out and hurt you, or Marcus or anyone. I can't let that happen. I should go away I should leave you all so that I can never hurt you but I can't because of the link I have to stay or Marcus and my sisters will be hurt and they mustn't be hurt you mustn't be hurt I have to control must stay in control..."

Gideon grabbed Deborah by the shoulders and pulled her to him, rocking her fiercely in his arms, as he tried to stop the words that were pouring out of her again. Gradually, the words ran down, and he felt his wife pulling away from him. She sat upright on the bench, apparently having brought herself under control, and said quietly, "I'm sorry. I won't let that happen again. But this is why I can't be with you, Matthew. When I'm with you I want to let go, I want to love you and have you love me and make love to me and I can't allow that to happen because then I'll lose control and..." Deborah stopped herself abruptly, took a deep breath and started again.

"Matthew, I think you should divorce me. I can't be a wife to you any more."

Gideon looked at her, dumbstruck with horror. It took him a few minutes to collect his thoughts enough to say a single word.

"No."

The silence that followed that word lengthened, as he stared at Deborah and she gazed back at him, impassive in the face of his refusal. Gideon finally pulled himself together enough to continue.

"No divorce. You're my wife, for better, for worse. Do you remember those words? I meant every one of them, including the ones that went 'Until death do us part'." Gideon stood abruptly and grabbed Deborah's hand, pulling her upright, to stand in front of him in the pool of light before the statue of Valen. He reached out and touched her cheek, stroking down the length of her jaw, until he rested his fingers on her lips. Was it his imagination or had Deborah's lips moved just a little? Had that been the tiniest hint of a kiss that she had just touched to his fingers? Gideon could only hope that it was.

The Captain spoke gently, doing everything he could to communicate how much he loved his wife. "I know things are pretty grim right now, but we're going to get through this. I promised you once that together we can do anything, and I still believe that." He paused, trying to find the right words, then said, "Delemn was just telling you about Valen. If he really was Jeff Sinclair, then he gave up everything, he had everything taken away from him by the Vorlons, when he went back into the past to do what they wanted

him to do. Deborah, you still have so much. You have your sisters, you have our son and you have me. We'll never stop loving you, and we'll never leave you."

Gideon swallowed hard, and moved his fingers to wipe away the tear that trickled down his wife's face, then went on, "The city in the valley below here is known as the City of Sorrows, because a long time ago a lot of Minbari died there. Now it's a beautiful city, something positive built from the pain of the past. The Minbari say that to dream in the City of Sorrows is to dream of a better future. Well, that's what I'm doing right now. I'm dreaming of a better future, a better future for us together, because I'm determined that we are going to be together every day for the rest of our lives. Try to believe that we can make that happen."

Gideon watched as another tear slid down Deborah's cheek, and heard her whisper, "I'll try."

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

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four P

[{Part 1: The Centauri Trial}](#)