

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Four R - Part 2: The Last Battle

by *The Space Witches*



Telekinesis opens new possibilities in bed... and out of it.

Chapter 2

25th February 2273

Angel

I lay with my head resting against Mal's smooth chest, basking in the sensation of tired satisfaction I was feeling. As soon as we'd got inside my quarters, my cowboy had ripped off my panties, mounted me, and given me the ride of my life. There are times when there's nothing quite like a good romp in the hay to keep a girl happy, and that cowboy surely could romp!

Mal stroked my hair gently as we lay entwined around each other, and I was just drifting into sleep when his voice roused me. "Are you going to tell me how you did that thing in the landing bay?"

I looked up at him and grinned coyly. "What thing?"

He grinned back and moved his hand down to tweak my nipple. "You know what I mean, girl. That thing about lifting John out of the crate. How did you do that?"

I yelped and tried to squirm away, but he was too quick for me. He rolled me onto my back and shifted to lie on top of me, grabbing my wrists and pinning me to the bed. I looked up into his incredible dark blue eyes, with their long, thick eyelashes, and wriggled underneath him, rubbing my belly against his stiffening shaft. I knew there was a good chance that my cowboy would be mounting his filly again very soon.

Grinning up at him, I asked, "You mean, how did I do this?"

Exerting my mental powers, I lifted his body until he was floating in the air about ten centimeters above me. I made no attempt to move, just grinned up at him as he hovered in mid-air.

Mal's face was a picture as he looked down and realized what I'd done. "Hey! Put me down!"

I lowered him gently until his body once again rested on mine, still grinning at his complete astonishment. He'd let go of my wrists as he'd lifted, so I reached up and stroked his cheek. "I'm a telekinetic, Mal. I can move things with my mind."

Mal looked down at me, his eyes narrowed. "Are you a teep, too? I thought most teeks were telepaths first."

I shook my head vehemently. "Not me. I don't read minds, I just move things. Oh, and sometimes I cast spells."

Mal gave me a puzzled frown, so I explained that I was also a witch. "So you be careful, Captain Fillion, or I may just turn you into a toad."

My cowboy's eyes ignited with passion as he looked down at me, then he started to slide down my body, kissing my breasts, my belly and my thighs before finally coming to rest between my legs. He moved his hands to part my swollen folds, and started to lick gently at my clit. I arched my back with pleasure and moved my hands to run my fingers through his hair, encouraging him, as he slid his fingers inside me and began thrusting in and out, moving his thumb to stimulate my clit further.

I groaned in pleasure again, and opened my eyes to look at him as he lifted his head and said, "You don't need to cast any more spells on me, girl. I'm already enchanted. But you don't want to turn me into a toad, either. No toad is going to do this for you."

With that he moved quickly, kneeling upright, flipping me onto my belly, then pulling me up until I rested on my hands and knees in front of him. Before I could even take a breath, he plunged into me, and started to ride me hard.

Demon

The sound of the alarm clock roused me from a deep and satisfying slumber, and I gave a little groan of dismay as I pulled the covers over my head, trying to pretend I hadn't heard the alarm, didn't know the time, and that I could go back to sleep again for another few hours.

Matthew's quiet groan echoed mine, but he pushed back the covers and slowly climbed out of our bed. As he padded to the bathroom, I slid across the bed into the warm spot he'd left behind. It was a small consolation, but when Matthew has to get up early, I love to snuggle down into his side of the bed, pulling his pillow close to my face, and inhaling his scent. Somehow, my husband's side of the bed always seems more comfortable than mine. Of course, I prefer it when he's in it.

I was drifting back to sleep when I was roused again by the covers being pulled back from over me, and a gentle kiss touching my forehead. I opened my eyes, and smiled up at my husband, my heart doing its

usual back-flip at the sight of him.

Matthew's hair was neatly combed back, but I knew it would soon flop forward, as yet again he'd let it grow too long for precise military etiquette. His face was smooth from the razor, and I lifted my hand to touch his cheek, longing to pull him back into bed with me, but knowing that he had an important meeting to attend.

"You haven't had any breakfast," I whispered, moving to get out of bed.

Matthew smiled and pushed me back down, saying quietly, "I'll get something later. Go back to sleep for as long as Marcus will let you. I'll probably be tied up for a couple of hours, but then I'm off duty until noon. If you can take Marcus to the crèche, I'll come back and we can have a little quiet time together."

I smiled again, knowing that such time would be anything but quiet. Our quarters would very quickly be filled with the pants, moans and screams of passionate sex. I moved my hand behind my husband's neck, pulling him down into another kiss, then I whispered, "Maybe I should finish modeling the things I bought yesterday."

Matthew's smile became lascivious as he flicked up his eyebrows, then he quickly pulled back the bedcovers to display my naked body. He bent swiftly to kiss my breasts, then straightened and said, "That's the model I want to see."

*I gave a little scream and pulled the covers back over myself, curling up to watch Matthew's butt as he marched out of the bedroom. I thought back on how he had been when he'd returned to our quarters the night before: tired, strung out, but full of passion. He'd stripped quickly and climbed into bed next to me, touching me in places he knew would arouse me, (although there are very few places Matthew can touch me that *don't* set me off!) After making love, we'd rested for a while then Matthew had wanted to see the new lingerie I'd bought on Babylon 5. I'd only got as far as modeling one set of bra and panties before he'd pounced on me again.*

I knew that much of Matthew's arousal had come from his mixed feelings toward my sister. Angel had linked to me on her way back to her quarters, barely coherent with excitement at the return of her lover. She and Captain Fillion had no doubt been making like mad bunnies all night, and Matthew knew it. The thought of them being together had both angered and aroused him, and he'd come home with his head full of conflicting emotions.

I know that most women would think me either insane or some kind of saint to tolerate such feelings in my husband, but I'm neither. It's just that other women don't have my powers. My empathy, albeit less sensitive than it once was, allows me to sense the one over-riding feeling that overwhelms all others, the one thing that overlays all Matthew's confusion about Angel, and that's his love for me. As long as I feel that love, as long as it burns so brightly that it pushes all his other feelings into the shadows, I can forgive Matthew just about anything.

*A small warm spot glowed deep inside me in anticipation of what was to come later that morning. Or more to the point, *who* was to come.*

Gideon

Marching down the corridor toward the conference room, I couldn't help whistling softly to myself. I was

tired and a little sore in places from the previous night's exertions, but I felt good. Damned good, in fact. Now I just wanted to get this mission finished, round up the bad guys and get on with my life. I nodded at a few crewmembers as I passed them, detoured via the bridge to receive a quick summary from Lieutenant Jackson, picked up my datapad containing her full report (which could be pretty much summarized as 'nothing happened') and walked through to the conference room.

I was thankful that Christina and Lieutenant Siddhartha were quite competent to run the Excalibur between them while my ship was holding station alongside B5. It meant that John and I could take a break from the daily monotony of bureaucracy and paperwork that make up 90% of the work of commanding a spaceship.

It didn't surprise me that John was already seated in the conference room, a mug of coffee in front of him, studying his own datapad. He looked up quickly as I entered, and moved to stand, but I waved him back into his seat, and walked over to the coffee pot to pour my own mug.

As I did so, I looked at John and gave him a sheepish grin. "I didn't know they'd do that." I gestured at John's bare scalp before continuing, "It...Uh...It suits you."

John snorted and shook his head. "You're a better liar than that when you try, Captain."

I grinned. He was right, of course. "OK, so it doesn't suit you, but I guess it will grow back."

John gave me an evil grin. "You'll have to answer to Lily if it doesn't."

I took a hasty gulp of coffee to hide my reaction to that threat. I try never to let any of my crew see when I'm *really* scared.

Matheson

My Captain swallowed his coffee hastily then changed the subject. "Before everyone gets here, can you give me a brief summary of what happened on B5?"

I nodded, glancing at the clock on the wall. We had about fifteen minutes before the others arrived. I knew I should be able to brief Matthew in that time. As I started telling him about Talia and Welles, I thought back on my arrival home the previous night.

Lily had been angry, solicitous, worried, frightened, and passionate all at the same time. No other woman I have ever encountered would have been capable of demonstrating quite so many emotions simultaneously, but Lily managed it effortlessly. She had scolded me as she'd kissed me, threatened dire retribution on all and sundry as she'd massaged my legs, then burst into tears when she'd caressed my bare scalp, all under the watchful and slightly amused eyes of our husband, Luke.

When Lily started to cry, Luke and I had looked at each other and smiled. We'd needed no other communication. Luke had stooped and swept Lily into his arms, carrying her into the bedroom, while I limped into our children's room, kissing each of them goodnight as they slept, then joined my lovers in our bed. What had followed had been one of the most satisfying, if exhausting, nights I could ever recall.

I paused in my report to take another sip of coffee. I needed the caffeine to make up for the lack of sleep, but my tiredness was a price well worth paying for the wonderful night I'd spent in Luke and Lily's arms.

I just hoped no one wanted me to do anything too physically strenuous that day. I felt as if a soft breath of wind might blow me away.

Finishing my report, I watched my Captain lean back in his chair and close his eyes. From the look of the shadows under those eyes, Matthew hadn't got as much sleep as he should the night before, either. I smiled to myself again, having a pretty good idea of why that might be. I was half-tempted to tease him about too much bed and not enough sleep, but at that moment the doors opened, and Mal Fillion entered the room, with General Lochley, Captain Marriot, Marcus Cole and Security Chief Allen close on his heels.

It was time to get down to business.

Gideon

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them again to check the clock on the wall. We'd been talking for well over an hour, and it was time to summarize our plans and take action. I hated long meetings, having endured way too many of them during our search for a cure to the Drakh plague. So I took a deep breath and cut across the various conversations taking place around the table.

"OK, so this is the plan. Ben and Zack go back to Babylon 5, while General Lochley and Marcus stay on board the Excalibur." I was careful to use Liz's formal title. She didn't look to be in a very good mood that morning, and I was worried she might bite me if I called her Liz. It wouldn't be the first time she'd done that.

"Zack and Ben will spread the news around B5 that the Excalibur is headed for Earth to take General Lochley and Marcus home." That elicited a few nods from around the table. So far so good.

"Zack will keep tabs on our favorite traitor and all around pain in the ass, Mr. Welles, and arrest him as soon as this Talia person leaves." I looked at Zack and got a reluctant nod from him. Something was wrong with the B5 Security Chief that morning; something more than his usual dislike for me. I wondered whether he was going to tell us what his problem was, before I had to beat it out of him. I really hoped he would, as I didn't think Ben would appreciate me beating up his Security Chief. Then there was the other problem that Zack looked as if he could handle himself in a fight. Maybe I'd get GTan to beat it out of him.

Pushing such entertaining thoughts to one side, I raised an eyebrow and asked Zack, "Are you going to be able to keep him quiet for a while? We don't want him contacting his fellow traitors in Humanity First."

Zack glowered at me, but nodded. "I'll make sure we 'accidentally' bump into each other, then I'll tell him I didn't know he was on board, check the entry logs in front of him, and when I find he's not listed, reluctantly tell him he'll have to come with me while we straighten out the records. Once he's in the brig, I can keep him there for a few days."

The expression of malice on Zack's face made me decide I never wanted to let him get me in his brig alone for a few minutes, never mind a few days, but I kept that thought to myself as I moved on. "OK, with Welles secured and Talia off B5, we can focus on the Excalibur end of the mission. Instead of going to Earth, we'll go directly to the system where Ranger Fillion arranged the rendezvous point, and hide in the asteroid belt, waiting for the Lion and the ship she's meeting to arrive."

I nodded at Fillion, who nodded back at me. I had been working really hard all the way through the

meeting not to look at him more often than I had to. I was particularly trying not to look at the mark on his neck, obviously left there by an over-enthusiastic Angel, and I was also trying to avoid seeing the dark shadows under his eyes; clear evidence that the Ranger hadn't slept much the night before. I was working really, *really* hard at not seeing those things, and failing completely.

I gritted my teeth in annoyance, and went on. "John and Fillion will go back to the Lion, via B5, traveling cargo class again, I'm afraid." I looked apologetically at my XO, who shook his head and smiled. He'd assured me that the cramps in his legs were all better, and the short run across to B5 then from there to the Lion, wouldn't be a problem. I'd made my own arrangements to ensure John's comfort, but he'd find out about those soon enough.

I devoutly wished there was a way to avoid sending John over to the Lion, but I hadn't been able to think of one. It was imperative that my XO should be on board the Lion when they rendezvoused with the Raiders. Only John could protect Fillion from another mental attack from Talia. I was dreading telling Lily that John had to leave again, and this time for several days, but there was no choice. I decided that we'd delay our departure from B5 long enough so that John could tell Lily himself, and provide whatever 'comfort' his wife needed to get her through the days ahead. Yeah, I know, I'm a coward. If you'd ever met Lily, you'd know why.

What *really* grated was that the delay would allow Fillion time to go back to Angel. I didn't want to think about what comfort the Ranger might give my other sister-in-law.

Before I'd agreed to the plan, Fillion had assured me that his crew was now cleared of all Raider influences. He'd ditched Scott Atkins, his previous First Officer and Navigator, who had been a known Raider infiltrator. Fillion's smile as he'd used the word 'ditched' made me wonder. Just how had Atkins left the Lion? Through an open airlock? Naked? Fillion seemed like a thrifty man who wouldn't waste good clothes. It was almost enough to make me like him.

Almost.

Atkins' replacement was another human Ranger, named Pierre Casu. The only non-Ranger now on board the Lion was their Supercargo and Weapons Officer, Gagarin, who Fillion assured me was safe. I tended to believe him, as when the crew of the Lion had been on board the Excalibur some months before, my wife had told me that Gagarin had a huge crush on Fillion, although the Ranger didn't know it.

So John would be safe on board the Lion. Well, as safe as any of them would be. Which given that I would be lurking nearby, with the Excalibur's main gun on line and ready to take out any ship that tried to attack them, was pretty safe. Or so I thought at the time. Just goes to show how stupid I can be.

"OK, so we all know what we have to do. So now maybe Chief Allen would like to tell us all what's been eating him ever since we got in here."

I turned to look at Zack, who glowered back at me. For a moment, I wondered if he'd refuse to talk, but then he sighed, sat back in his seat, and said, "It's Talia. There's something you should know about her."

Matheson

I was appalled as I listened to Chief Allen's story about what had been done to Talia Winters. I knew there had been many crimes perpetrated by my fellow teeps in Psi Corps over the years, but this was one of the

worst things I'd ever heard. To force a false personality onto one of their own kind, then to implant a trigger, which would allow the false personality to take over the body, was sickening.

It explained the odd echo I had felt when I had touched Talia's mind. There was some vestige of the original Talia still there, an idea that horrified me. To be trapped inside your own head, with another person controlling your actions and feelings, was truly horrific. Perhaps it would have been better if the original personality had been completely destroyed, although at least this way I supposed there might be some hope that one day the original Talia could be restored. I just had no idea how that could be done. Was there enough left of her? Could the false personality be suppressed?

As these thoughts passed through my mind, Zack answered some of my unspoken questions.

"When this is over, if we have her in custody, I'd like to let my old boss, Michael Garibaldi, know. He was... fond... of the original Talia, and he'll be pleased to hear that she's survived. At one time, a Psi Cop tried to make him think she'd been murdered and dissected for research purposes."

I shuddered at the thought, but I knew it was entirely possible that the Psi Corps had done things like that. There seemed no limit to the cruelty my kind could commit, both on mundanes and on ourselves. Stories of atrocities from the Telepath Wars flowed through my mind, and I shuddered again.

The gentle squeeze of Matthew's hand on my arm brought me back to the present, and I gave him a grateful glance, as I listened to Zack continue.

"A few years back, Garibaldi came across this weird guy called Abbut. He was what's known as a Vicker. Somehow, Vickers can record feelings, emotions, thoughts: everything that makes a person who they are. This one was employed by the first Vorlon Ambassador to B5--Kosh--to make a recording of Talia's mind. Mike had no idea why Kosh had done that, but Abbut gave Mike the recording, which he's kept ever since. He hoped that Bester had lied to him. That one day he'd find Talia again, and find a way to give her back what she'd lost."

The name Bester sent another shiver down my spine. He was an escaped war criminal whom we'd encountered some years before. The fact that Bester had saved my life didn't endear him to me. It didn't surprise me at all that Bester was the Psi Cop who'd tried to mess with Garibaldi's mind, pretending that Talia was dead. It was just the sort of mind game Bester loved.

Zack glowered at my Captain, and said, "Satisfied? Does that explain why I'm not exactly happy to see the body of someone I once knew walking around with a different personality running the show? I hope to God Garibaldi can fix her, because what was done to that poor woman stinks. It's enough to make you despise all teeps, especially ones who betray you, and leave..."

Chief Allen cut himself off in mid-sentence, and I tried to block his thoughts, but not before he had broadcast the image of a woman so loudly from his mind that I couldn't help but see it. It wasn't Talia, as I might have expected. It was red-haired woman who looked familiar, but I couldn't place her. The wave of pain that accompanied the image in Allen's mind was almost overwhelming, and I had to grit my teeth to hide my reaction to it.

Zack stood abruptly then flung himself out of the conference room.

Ben Marriot stood more slowly, shaking his head. He gave us all a rueful smile, saying, "I don't know what that was all about, but I think it's time for us to leave anyway." He held out his hand toward

Matthew and smiled. "Good to see you again, Matt. Good luck with the rest of the mission, and next time, stay a little longer, so I can see your wife and son again."

Then Captain Marriot turned to me, and held out his hand again. I held back a surge of gratitude and pride at his trust in me, and raised my mental shields as high as they would go, as I took his hand and shook it firmly. Marriot smiled at me and said, "Same goes for you, Commander. Next time bring that lovely wife of yours to see me. And I still want to meet all your kids."

With that, he saluted Lochley briskly and left the conference room.

Gideon

After I'd sent John back to his quarters, with instructions to be ready for departure at noon, I looked across at Fillion, expecting him to depart with equal haste. To my surprise, he seemed lost in thought. I cleared my throat to gain his attention, and he looked up at me enquiringly.

"Is there something more we can do for you, Captain?" I asked politely, torn between wanting him to stay, as then he'd have less time with Angel, and wanting him to go, which would give me more time with Deborah.

Fillion frowned and muttered, "This Talia development is worrying. I think..." He trailed off, then his face cleared. He smiled at me, and said, "No, Captain, nothing you can do, but while I'm waiting for John, there's someone else..." Again he trailed off, leaving me gritting my teeth as he gave me a nod and left the conference room at a run. No prizes for guessing where he was headed.

I turned to see Marcus Cole watching me carefully and smiling smugly. I'd have loved to wipe that smile from his face, but that would have just confirmed his suspicions, so I smiled sweetly and told him that if he needed to transfer any of his things over from Babylon 5, now was the time to do it.

Marcus nodded and left the conference room whistling off key. I think it was Gilbert & Sullivan he was whistling, but it was hard to be sure.

That left me alone with Liz Lochley, which wasn't where I wanted to be. I stood and started to say, "The same goes for you, General, if you need anything from B5..."

Liz cut in before I could finish my sentence. "I got a message from Sandra this morning." She bit her lip and for a moment I thought it was bad news. Then she looked up at me, and her eyes filled with tears, but I could see at once that they were tears of happiness, as she broke into the biggest grin I had ever seen on her face. "She's pregnant."

I sat down again abruptly, and my utter confusion must have been clear, as Liz laughed at me. "Close your mouth, Matt. You'll swallow flies like that. Sandra has been implanted with one of her own eggs, which had been fertilized using some of my chromosomes. Our daughter will be a true blend of us both. One X chromosome from each of us."

I blinked a few times before I said, "You'll have to forgive me. I'm feeling a tad superfluous at this point."

I'd heard of the procedure Liz described. It was a way two women could have a child together without the intervention of a man. Two men could create a child the same way, with one of them donating an X

chromosome and one a Y, but they still needed a woman's egg to get them started, and the chances of success were much greater if the baby were grown inside a woman's womb. So men still needed women to procreate, while women seemed to have got to the point where they really didn't need us poor males at all. Well, some of them didn't need us. I was married to one woman who demonstrated her need for me every day. Loudly.

One I recovered from the shock, I leaned across the table and took Liz's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'm really happy for you, Elizabeth. I know your daughter will be as beautiful as her mothers." I couldn't resist giving her a wink as I went on, "And as smart and just as bossy. General. Sir. Ma'am."

Liz burst out laughing and leaned across to give me a hug. I don't think I've ever seen her look quite as happy as she looked at that moment. Grinning from ear to ear she said, "Now let's just get this mission over with, so I can get home to my pregnant wife and give her all the back and foot rubs she deserves."

I gave a regretful laugh, remembering all too well that Deborah had been left alone for most of the time she'd been carrying our son. I hadn't been able to be there for her, being a little preoccupied with saving Earth at the time. I vowed silently that if we ever had another child, things would be different. I would be there every moment, supporting her through every second of her pregnancy. I kept all these thoughts to myself, just saying to Liz, "Amen to that," as I stood and steered her out of the conference room.

It was just before 09:00 and I had three hours before I had to be back on duty, ready to see John and Fillion off the ship in their crate. I knew exactly what I wanted to do with those three hours, and Lochley didn't feature in those plans at all.

Matheson

There was quite a crowd gathered in landing bay to see Ranger Fillion and me off on the next stage of our mission. Marcus Cole had come down to say goodbye, while Matthew stood with his arm around Demon, who looked a little more tousled than usual. Her lips were red and swollen, and her eyes dark. It didn't take much imagination to guess how my Captain had occupied himself in the hours since our last meeting.

Demon's sister, Angel was in a similar condition. She stood next to Fillion, with her arm around his waist, and his arm draped casually across her shoulders. Her lips were swollen, too, her neck flushed and the bright blue of her eyes lost in her widened pupils. I'm sure she and Fillion had both been limping when they'd arrived.

Then again, I can't say that Lily, Luke and I were exactly walking straight. We'd spent the last few hours enjoying each other in ways only possible for a ménage a trios. Until you've experienced being between two lovers, inside one, with the other inside you, it's impossible to imagine the pleasure and closeness it brings. Luke, Lily and I had made love in every position imaginable and a few unimaginable, finally reaching a crescendo of pleasure as Luke and I had both entered Lily, allowing our fiery redhead to lift us to new heights of ecstasy. I smiled as I remembered the post-coital aftermath of sadness, lying in each others' arms, knowing that soon we would have to part.

I rubbed my chest where Lily's long nails had left their marks on me, knowing that it would be at least four days before I returned to my family. The Excalibur would depart immediately Fillion and I had been sent across to Babylon 5, but it would take several hours before we reached the Lion. By then the Excalibur would be well on her way to the rendezvous point, ready to hide in the field of asteroids circling one of the planets in that system, waiting for the Raiders to appear.

The Excalibur was much faster than the little Lion, and wasn't restricted to the use of Jumpgates, so she would arrive sometime the next day, nearly three days ahead of us. We would follow on more slowly, staying close to the beacons in hyperspace, before emerging into the designated system in time to make our rendezvous. We would arrive in four days time, ready to meet the Raiders. I was hoping to catch up on some sleep during that time, as right then I was fit for nothing.

Before all that could happen, Fillion and I had to be smuggled back on board the Lion. That meant traveling cargo again. I sighed and stepped forward to examine the crate, keeping my arm around Lily's shoulders, until she demanded to be lifted up to see inside. I had become somewhat of a connoisseur of crates in the previous twenty-four hours, and I had to admit that as crates went, this one was pretty damned spiffy.

Matthew had obviously had our engineers working on it. It now contained several tanks of air, which should be more than sufficient to keep Fillion and me alive until we reached the Lion, although I also saw a couple of breathers secured to one side for emergencies. A CO₂ scrubber had been installed, to ensure that the amount of carbon dioxide accumulating inside the airtight container didn't exceed safe levels. Most importantly, I could see that two hammock-like slings had been created from nylon webbing, securely fastened to the sides. Once Fillion and I were secured inside these slings, we should get a much more comfortable ride back to B5 than we'd had on the way over.

I turned to thank Matthew for having made all the necessary preparations, and found that he was watching Fillion and Angel as they made their farewells. The expression of distaste on Matthew's face made his feelings all too clear. My Captain was not a happy man. I shifted my gaze to Demon, who was also watching Angel and Fillion, but with a gentle smile on her face. It was good to see Demon relaxed enough to show any expression; she usually masked her feelings in public. As I watched, she looked over at me and gave me a rueful smile, then turned to Matthew and whispered something to him. Whatever she said made him smile, and he looked down at his wife, his face now showing his admiration and devotion to her. It was a much more attractive expression than the look of jealousy I'd seen a few moments before.

My attention was brought back to Lily, as she expressed her approval of the transport arrangements. Then her emerald eyes filled as she looked up at me, her bottom lip trembling as she said, "I'll miss you every minute."

*A tear trickled down her cheek and I lifted my hand to brush it away, caressing her face as I sent a thought to her and Luke. *[I'll miss you, too. And the children. And Luke.]* I looked over Lily's shoulder at our husband, and I could see the pain in his eyes. This wasn't the first time we'd been apart since our marriage, but it would for the longest time so far. I never wanted to be parted from my family for so long again.*

I held my arms out and Lily rushed into them. I squeezed her tightly against me, as Luke spread his arms around us both, hugging us to him. We stayed like that for a moment, our minds and bodies linked in love then reluctantly I pushed them away. It was time to go.

Angel

I watched as the top of the crate was secured in place and sighed softly. Demon had come over to stand at my side, and now she put her arm around my shoulders and gave me a gentle hug. My sister may not be able to read my feelings as she can others, but right then she didn't need to be an empath to know that I

felt a little sad.

The hours I'd spent with Mal had been wonderful. I was sore and tired, I could hardly walk straight, and I was going to miss my cowboy, but beneath a surface veneer of sorrow, deep down I was happy. Dylan Hunt had started my healing after the awful events on Centauri Prime, but Mal Fillion had completed the process. I didn't love Mal, and he didn't love me, but we liked each other a lot, and enjoyed each other enormously. Dylan had made me believe that hope was possible, and Mal had shown me that the future wasn't entirely bleak. Two very different men, but each had helped me in their own way.

I turned to my sister and gave her a wink. "I'm hoping that's not the last I'll see of my Ranger. He's promised me that when this mission is over, he'll come visit me again. I think I'd better get some rest between now and then, or I'll be no use to him at all."

Demon chuckled and looked at me carefully. I knew she was trying to see if I was really OK about Mal leaving, so I gave her a reassuring grin. "Stop worrying about me, big sister. Mal and I had fun, but he hasn't stolen my heart. Life goes on."

My sister pulled me into her arms and gave me a big hug, patting me on the back as she whispered, "He's out there, Angel, and one day you'll find him."

I didn't need to ask who she meant. We both knew I was looking for the man who would give me my happy ever after. I hadn't met him yet, but one day...

I wriggled out of Demon's arms and turned to leave, only to find Marcus Cole standing watching us, a wide, silly grin spread across his face. Demon moved away to join Matthew, and they left the landing bay together as the crate holding John and Mal was lifted into the shuttle. Luke and Lily had already left, so I moved to join Marcus, linking my arm with his.

The Ranger looked down at me, and his eyes sparkled with mischief as he said, "Are you quite well, Angel? I thought I saw you limping as you came in with Ranger Fillion. Actually, I thought he was limping, too. Have you both injured yourselves somehow?"

I glared up at him, silently warning him to back off, but Marcus never does know when to leave something alone. He went on, "The last time I saw people walking like that, they'd been on rather a strenuous ride. But you and Fillion can't have been riding, can you, Angel?"

His reference to riding brought back a flood of memories that stiffened my nipples and sent a wave of warmth through my belly. This got worse as Marcus went on, "Ranger Fillion seems like a man who'd enjoy a good mount. He'd probably enjoy roping a fine young filly and riding her hard."

My nipples got even harder as I remembered Mal tying me to the bed face down with silk scarves, then mounting me from behind, laying himself along my back, biting gently at the back of my neck as he thrust his hard cock into me, hitting that special spot deep inside me again and again, until I screamed in pleasure and pain for him to stop. All the time I was thinking, Marcus' voice babbled on, "Then again, I suspect that you enjoy a good mount, too, don't you, Angel? Nothing like getting a strong stallion between your legs and riding him hard."

That brought back another memory. This time it was me who had tied Mal to the bed, climbing on top of him, impaling myself on his shaft, and riding him until we both collapsed into waves of orgasm. It had been one hell of a night and morning, OK? It was no wonder we'd both limped out of my quarters.

I'd remained silent all the time Marcus babbled, but I think my nipples had spoken for themselves, as they now stuck out from my chest like twin flagpoles. Marcus may be a complete gentleman, but he's male, so he could hardly escape noticing the state I was in. I was probably sending out waves of pheromones like a bitch on heat.

As we approached the door of the landing bay, I looked up at my tormentor, and batted my eyelashes at him. "Marcus, you really ought to know better than to tease a witch."

With perfect timing, I slipped my arm from his, stopping dead in my tracks, as he took a pace forward, arriving in the doorway. At that moment, I used my telekinesis to release the mechanism of the Denn'bok Marcus carried at his waist. Both ends sprang out, ramming themselves into the door jams. The momentum of Marcus' stride took him right over the top of the pike, and he did a complete somersault, before landing on his back on the floor outside, his pike sliding down the doorway with his body to come to rest on top of him.

As I stepped over his prone body, I saw the stunned expression on his face, and nearly lost it. Somehow keeping my face under control I said in my most superior tone of voice, "Especially a telekinetic witch. And by the way, Marcus. Mal's staff is bigger than yours."

I stalked--OK limped--off down the corridor, grinning widely. I heard Marcus muttering about pikal envy as he climbed to his feet and dusted himself down. That'll teach him.

27th February 2273

Gideon

We'd been hiding among the debris of a shattered moon for over twenty-four hours when the other ship arrived. The timing was worrying. The ship was two days early for the rendezvous with the Lion, which would give it plenty of time to scout around, looking for any other ships that might be hiding somewhere. Like in an asteroid belt, for example, where the Excalibur was concealed.

Not good.

What made it even more interesting was the size and origin of the vessel. It was an old Asimov class ship, which when they had been in regular service in the late 50's and early 60's as luxury liners, had carried over one hundred crew and around three hundred passengers, along with a heavy tonnage of cargo. That was one big mother of a ship, and it worried me, even though it was only a third the size of the Excalibur. Apart from anything else, even the old liners had always carried at least two shuttles. This ship could easily carry many more fighters, and it might be much better armed than the old liners had been. It wasn't going to be an easy ship to force into surrender.

The fact that the damned thing had appeared through its own jump-point was disturbing, too. Most Asimov class ships were restricted to routes connected by Jumpgates, and we'd been watching the gate to this system like a cat at a mouse-hole since we'd arrived. Fortunately, I have a superb sensor team, and my Brakiri Sensor Chief, Ankaren, had given me a few seconds warning of the jump-point opening. Then this great globe of a ship had surged through, luckily several light minutes away from us, around the other side of the sun. It was only the Excalibur's Vorlon enhanced sensors that had enabled us to detect the ship so quickly.

I was glad the ship hadn't turned up any sooner, as the day we'd spent hiding between the asteroids had given the emissions we'd left behind sufficient time to disperse, so there was now no trace anywhere in that solar system that the Excalibur, or any other ship, had moved through it. I had my ship on silent running, with all non-essential systems shut down, and that, combined with the metallic asteroids that surrounded us, made us damned difficult to detect.

You could have heard a pin drop on the bridge as we all froze, watching Ankaren's sensors, which he'd projected up onto the main viewscreen at my command. We all watched as the large sphere--an Asimov class line measures 600 meters across--maneuvered itself slowly around the system. A short while later, my worst fears were proven correct. A dozen fighters emerged from the mothership's shuttle bay, scattering around the system, obviously looking for intruders.

Two of them came our way, but the combination of our plasteel/crystalline armored hull and our silent running routine was obviously enough to fool their sensors. The fighters flew right past the asteroid we were hiding behind and didn't spot us.

The sound of the collective sigh of relief that echoed around the bridge was like a breeze through grass. Ankaren turned in his station to look at me, shaking his head and grinning. As the fighters had approached, he'd turned off nearly all of the scanners, fearing that they could set off an alarm on one of the enemy ships. The trick had worked, and I now nodded to him to turn the scanners back on. All the ships we had seen were at least ten years old and all of Earth Alliance design and manufacture. It was highly unlikely any of them would have the power or technology to find us.

We all relaxed and watched as the search of the system continued. It was quite methodical, but in the end we saw the fighters returning to their mobile base, and the mothership moved to conceal itself behind a nearby moon. They were now only light seconds away from us, but it seemed they didn't have a clue we were watching.

Several hours passed during which nothing happened, except I got bored and uncomfortable in my chair. I'd brought a deck of cards to the bridge with me, and I had just dealt myself yet another hand of patience, when Marcus Cole trotted in, with Liz Lochley following close on his heels.

I have to admit that Liz had been pretty well-behaved during the previous couple of days. As the ranking officer on board, she could have thrown her weight around. Instead, she'd stayed in her quarters most of the time, only emerging to join me and Deborah for dinner the previous evening. I almost smiled to myself when I thought about the evening, which had gone surprisingly well. Liz and Deborah got along fine together, and Liz had been enchanted by our son, who fortunately had chosen to behave himself beautifully that evening. He'd even managed to find his mouth with his fork most of the time.

It was too much to hope that Lochley and Marcus Cole would stay off my bridge for the whole trip, but Marcus' reaction took me by surprise. I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head as he saw the image of the ship on the screen.

The Ranger stormed to the front of the bridge and peered closely at the screen, before returning to the side of my chair and saying quietly, "Do you know what that thing is?"

I nodded. "I guess it's the Raider mothership. They're early. We're watching them, Marcus. They're not going anywhere."

The Ranger shook his head and I began to feel uncomfortable as I saw how pale his face had become. "That's not a Raider, Captain. That's a Psi Corps mothership. I'm told they were all supposed to have been destroyed in the Telepath Wars, but obviously at least one survived. That ship..." he paused and turned to point at the screen, "is probably stuffed to the brim with old Psi Corps stalwarts, any one of whom could turn your brain inside out and eat it for breakfast. Think of it as a ship full of Besters."

Fuck.

It seemed like the only word suitable for the occasion, but I kept it to myself, not wishing to spread panic throughout the bridge crew. I was doing quite enough panicking for everyone at that point.

Fortunately, Marcus had been sensible enough to speak softly as he'd briefed me, and I was fairly sure no one else had heard his explanation. I chewed my lip for a moment, then shrugged, saying softly, "If they've spotted us mentally, they're not showing any signs. I could ask Lil..." I cut myself off abruptly. There was no need for Lochley to find out that I had the most powerful telepathic blocker in the galaxy on board my ship, in the person of the lively little redhead who was married to my First Officer and the Excalibur's CMO.

Two things occurred to me simultaneously. First, if I asked Lily to put up a block, there was a good chance the teeps on the Psi Corps ship would detect her blocking field. When she'd blocked the Joneses, they'd known what was happening; they just hadn't been able to do anything about it. If Lily put her shields up, it would alert the telepaths to our presence, and so far, they didn't seem to have noticed us. Second--and this was the scary thought--I wondered if Lily would still have the powers she'd once possessed.

When the Vorlon that had lived inside my wife had withdrawn it had warned us that the sisters' powers may be diminished, as they would no longer be able to merge. How much of Lily's ability had been powered by the Vorlon? Would she still be able to block telepaths as she once had?

I decided I needed to speak to the sisters as soon as I got off duty that evening. Once the Lion arrived and the rendezvous took place, the gloves would come off pretty damned quickly. I didn't want to be left without a defense against a ship full of telepaths. I definitely needed to talk to Deborah, Angel and Lily, and have them standing by.

In the meantime, I did the only thing I could. I gave orders for us to keep watching the Psi Corps mothership, and maintained a state of battle ready alert. It was going to be a long two days while we waited for the Lion.

Lochley gestured with her head toward the conference room, and she led the way off the bridge, with Marcus and me following. When we were behind closed doors, Lochley waved us to sit, then joined us, chewing at her thumbnail for a while before she began to speak softly.

"This is worst than anything we'd envisaged, Matt. All the Psi Corps motherships--and God knows there were more of them than we could have ever dreamed--were supposed to have been taken out in the Telepath Wars. They were infiltrated by rogue telepaths, and most of them were taken out in suicide missions. As you know, most of the fighting was between Psi Corps and 'blips' and most of the atrocities were carried out by telepaths on other telepaths."

Lochley fell silent, and I decided I was really glad that John wasn't present, hearing this. I don't know what part my XO and friend had played during that War; he's never spoken of it. I suspect that he was

on the side of the rebels, fighting for freedom from the Psi Corps, but that's only a hunch. Asking a teep which side they were on in the Telepath War is a little like asking an Earthforce officer who they fought for in the Clarke civil war. You just don't talk about it.

After a few moments, I said quietly, "Well, the rogues obviously didn't get them all. We may have a ship full of teeps out there, and the question is what do we do about them? The easiest thing would be to fire up the main gun and take them out. No one else would ever know they existed."

I wanted to know how Lochley would react to that suggestion. Would she agree? And what would I do if she did? Part of me hoped she would, as that way I could protect my crew and my family. Another part of me was deeply uncomfortable with firing on a ship before it had given any indication of hostile intent. The latter part was relieved when Liz gave me a horrified look. "That's not an option, Matt. Attack a vessel without warning and destroy it, along with everyone on board? Forget it." I wished I had my wife sitting next to me, telling me whether Liz was sincere, but she seemed genuine enough.

*I smiled and shook my head, raising my hands against Lochley's and Marcus' protests. "No, I wouldn't do that." Well, not if I could avoid it, but if the lives of my friends and family were at stake... I hurried on. "I just needed to be sure that you wouldn't, either. So what *do* we do? Do we order them to surrender and fight them if they refuse? You realize that if there are a significant number of teeps on board, they could attack us mentally as well as physically?"*

Lochley nodded. "I know. I'd call President Sheridan on Minbar and ask for a few shiploads of Minbari telepaths to be sent here, but they'd get here about twenty-four hours too late to be of any use to us."

I snorted my agreement at the futility of such an action. "And in the meantime, there's a good chance that the mothership would detect the signal we sent, which would alert them to our presence and then they'd hit us sooner rather than later. We seem to be between a rock and a hard place, General. We can't take them out with the main gun, we can't call for help, and when the Lion arrives, we may be subjected to a telepathic attack we can't resist. Wonderful." I didn't tell Lochley about my plan to get the sisters involved. The least she knew about their powers the better.

Lochley sighed. "Maybe we should get the hell out of here. We can contact the Lion in hyperspace and warn them off."

I shook my head. "If we do that, everything the Rangers have done to set this up will be wasted. This is the best chance you've had in years to find out who's really behind the Raiders and put an end to the problem. We can't throw that away."

I chewed my lip for a moment, aware that Marcus and Lochley were waiting for me to continue. "OK, I have an idea on how to deal with the telepaths. I can't tell you what it is, but by tomorrow I'll know whether it might work."

Not surprisingly, Lochley protested, but I managed to calm her, giving Marcus a warning look, not wanting him to ask any questions I didn't want to answer in front of Lochley. By some miracle he took the hint and stayed quiet as I wheedled Liz into accepting that I might have a solution to our problem, but I wasn't prepared to share it right then.

I went on, "So we wait for the Lion, make sure the Raider leaders are on the mothership, then order them to surrender. If they won't do that, we attack and try not to destroy them."

Lochley gave a worried smile. "If we can capture the crew, we can find out who's backing them, and discover the source of their funding within Earthforce. This time, we can finish the job properly, but only if you don't use that main gun of yours, Matt, although I know how fond of it you are." She gave me a wicked grin and a wink, making me laugh, as I remembered how Susan Ivanova had once described my main gun. Liz was trying to keep things light, knowing as well as I did how tough a spot we were in. She became more serious as she went on, "Are you sure about this Matt? This is putting your ship, your crew and your family at risk. Are you sure you can do something to stop the telepaths attacking us?"

I pushed myself to my feet with a deep sigh. "Maybe. If I can't then we'll jump, warn off the Lion, and try another plan later. If what I have in mind is feasible, we'll wait for the Lion. I guess we have a quiet, boring couple of days ahead of us." I could only wish that were true.

I left Marcus and Liz sitting in the conference room, and went back to my duties on the bridge, planning to talk to Deborah as soon as I got off duty. In the meantime, this was exactly the sort of job I hated. All tension and stress, with no action. Great.

28th February 2273

Matheson

I settled down to enjoy my dinner with an appreciation that had grown with every meal I'd eaten on the Lion. I'd discovered some interesting facts about life on board a small trading vessel, and the most interesting fact of all was the incredible range of foodstuffs they carried in their cargo hold.

It turned out that Stewart, Gagarin and Casu were all keen, competitive cooks, and Captain Fillion was more than happy to let them use their skills, taking it in turns to prepare incredible meals for the small crew of the Lion. It didn't surprise me in the least that Teri Stewart's ship-suit seemed to be suffering even more strain than when we'd first met her the year before. If I ate like that every day, I'd balloon up in weight very quickly, no matter how much exercise I did. I'd had to be very strict with myself at every meal, reminding myself that Lily and Luke would not appreciate me arriving back on the Excalibur with love handles.

Casu and Gagarin seemed to be able to eat infinite amounts of highly calorific food without it affecting them at all, although I noticed that Fillion avoided some of the richer dishes and desserts. When I looked closely, I did wonder if he'd gained a little weight since we'd last met. Then again, he probably needed feeding up after all his exertions on board the Excalibur with Angel.

I savored the taste of the various dim sum Gagarin had prepared for that evening's meal, trying to pace myself, as I knew further courses awaited us, including crispy duck and pancakes, followed by deep fried chili beef, lemon chicken and special fried rice. I do love Chinese food, and it was Gagarin's specialty.

It was particularly enjoyable, as I'd been expecting to live on food I could eat out of a sealed bag. The Lion wasn't big enough or new enough to carry artificial gravity generators, so I'd expected our trip to be weightless. Instead, as soon as we'd entered hyperspace, Stewart had set the ship spinning, creating its own artificial gravity. The motion created a weird Coriolis Effect, as our feet were spinning faster than our heads, but it gave us enough pull downwards for us to cook, eat and move around relatively normally.

Teri walked behind me to take her seat, rubbing my stubbly head as she passed. I shook my head in irritation. It was becoming an annoying habit of hers. She seemed to think my head was some sort of

lucky charm to be rubbed at every opportunity. I kept telling her that I wasn't a lucky Buddha, to be rubbed at every opportunity, but I had to admit that if I kept on eating like I had been, I could end up the same shape as a fat little Buddha statue.

Teri sat and started chowing down on the hors d'oeuvres, making it obvious why Andrei had prepared so many. Teri seemed to be eating for two or maybe even three, and not because she was pregnant, but just from sheer enjoyment and gusto. Despite her annoying little head rubbing habit, I liked the Lion's engineer a lot. She loved life and enjoyed it to the full. Teri seemed to have the attitude that every day should be lived as if it were going to be her last, which given the dangers inherent in the life of an undercover Ranger was probably the only way to live.

Looking around the big table, which was located right in the middle of the Lion's catering area, I could see that everyone was enjoying the food, the tea which Andrei had prepared to accompany his cooking, and the company. Conversation flowed easily, covering an enormous range of subjects, sometimes becoming heated, but never acrimonious. These were good people, doing a tough job, and doing it well.

"So when are you going to cook for us, Jean?" Pierre's accent made my name sound very sophisticated.

I grinned across at the irrepressible little Frenchman. He was small and thin, and I never could figure out where all the food he ate went. I figured he must work it off at weapon's practice. I'd watched him and Fillion fighting with Denn'boks in the cargo hold that morning, and despite being half Fillion's size, Pierre had been so fast that he'd easily held his own.

"When this mission is over, you'll all have to come back with me to my ship, and I'll cook 'John Matheson's famous chicken soup' for you. My partners insist it's the best soup in the galaxy, but they've never tasted Teri's clam chowder. I'm not sure anything can match that." I winked at Teri and dodged her hand as she reached out to rub my head again, rapping the back of her knuckles with my chop sticks.

Teri let out a yelp, withdrawing her hand quickly, then leaning back and loosening her belt a little. She was obviously getting herself settled to tackle the culinary delights to come.

Fillion cleared his throat, and we all turned around to look at him. "Talking of the mission, we'll arrive at the rendezvous point in twelve hours."

It felt as if a chilled blanket had settled over the table as we all remembered why we were there, and what lay ahead. Fillion went on, "Andrei, I want you on weapons, and I want everything we've got on a hair trigger, OK? I know the Excalibur will be looking out for us, but I don't want to have to rely on them completely. The Lion has her own defenses, so let's use them."

Gagarin nodded seriously. As the only one present who wasn't a Ranger, he'd been told that we were carrying out a difficult and dangerous trade, but that the profits made the risks worthwhile. I'd been introduced as the man who had brought the goods to Fillion, knowing that he'd get me a good deal.

The Lion's hold was packed with weapons provided by the Rangers, which matched the inventory Fillion had shown Talia and Welles. The weapons would pass basic inspection, but in fact most of them had been disarmed. Just a few carried live ammunition for demonstration purposes.

I have no idea how Fillion had explained the Excalibur's involvement in the deal to Gagarin, but somehow little Andrei didn't seem at all puzzled by the fact that the ISA's flagship would be standing by to defend a small trading vessel. He trusted his Captain implicitly, and worshipped the ground Fillion walked on. If

his Captain said it was OK, then that was good enough for Gagarin.

Fillion turned to Teri. "You'll be at the controls with Pierre. I want the two of you to stay on the bridge. If there's any sign of trouble, you get us out of there. John and I will be down in the cargo hold and we'll take care of anyone with us at the time. You two get us as close to the Excalibur as you can, as quickly as you can. Apart from saving our own skins, a certain young lady, who John knows well, has made it very clear to me that if John doesn't come out of this in one piece, she'll turn me into a toad. I've never seen a toad running a trading ship, so I think I'll give that a miss."

I couldn't help but laugh at Angel's threat. It was typical of the tempestuous raven-haired beauty. Before I could respond, Mal looked across at Andrei and said, "But let's enjoy the rest of dinner before we start worrying about tomorrow. It's duck next, isn't it? With pancakes and hoi sin sauce?"

Andrei nodded and grinned as Fillion licked his lips in anticipation of what was to come.

Gideon

I sat at the desk in my old quarters, feeling like the biggest rat in the universe. I was tired, strung out, and an hour earlier I'd yelled at my three year old son for doing something stupid at the dinner table. Marcus had gone very quiet, his eyes filling with tears and his bottom lip quivering, but he'd said nothing, just sat and looked down at his dinner plate in misery. Deborah had also said nothing, just eaten another couple of mouthfuls of her food then quietly told Marcus that he could get down if he'd finished.

Marcus had slid out of his chair, and ran through to his bedroom, while Deborah stood and cleared away his plate and her own, leaving me to finish my own dinner alone and in silence. I'd carried on eating, refusing to look up or to speak as my wife went through to join our son in his bedroom.

As soon as she'd gone I stopped eating; suddenly the food had tasted like sawdust. I knew I was being unreasonable, but somehow I didn't know how to stop. So I'd cleared away my own plate and gone through to my old quarters to work at my desk. I'd read a few reports and signed them off, all the time aware of the soft murmur of voices coming from my son's bedroom.

Leaning back in my chair, I closed my eyes and sighed deeply. The past twenty four hours had been exhausting. We'd stayed hidden, hardly daring to breathe in case we somehow brought ourselves to the attention of the Psi Corps mothership which was holding station a few light seconds away from us.

*I'd talked to the sisters the previous evening, and while Angel and Lily were confident they could maintain a block against the teeps on the mothership for as long as was needed, Deborah had expressed doubts about their abilities to me in private later. She was deeply concerned that the withdrawal of the Vorlon she carried within her would have diminished their capabilities. I'd tried to reassure her that it probably wouldn't be necessary to call on them, but I knew my wife wasn't convinced. Hell, as time passed, I was becoming more and more certain that we *would* need them, and I was relying on Angel and Lily being right. They had to be able to block the teeps, or we were in deep trouble.*

Lily had tried to contact John to warn him about what awaited the Lion, but their telepathic link hadn't been strong enough for her to get through. She'd had to admit that she would have to wait until John linked to her, before she could pass him the message. Of course, we couldn't send the Lion a message through the comm. channels, as it would almost certainly be picked up by the enemy, revealing our presence.

To add to the stress, Lieutenant Jackson and I had been pulling alternating twelve hour shifts on the bridge since we arrived in the system, covering John's absence. While I'd been happy to leave Lieutenant Siddhartha in command for part of the time we'd been stationed off B5, she didn't have the combat experience for me to be willing to leave her alone in the hot seat in this situation. It could explode into a fight at any second, and if that happened I wanted a commander on the bridge with combat experience.

Lochley had offered to stand watches to give me and Christina a break, but I'd thanked her and declined the offer, telling her it was only for a couple of days, and the crew were more used to responding to my Second Officer and me. It was true to an extent, but there was a part of me that just didn't want Liz commanding my ship. Stupid, I know, but I'm good at stupid.

The strain of waiting was showing on us all, but I was feeling particularly ashamed of myself for taking it out on my son. What sort of father did that make me? Yelling at the kid for spilling a drink? Come on, Matt, you know better than that. He's three years old, for God's sake!

My shame grew as I opened my eyes on hearing the soft pad of small feet. Marcus was dressed in his pajamas, ready for bed, clutching Half-Ted to his chest as he trotted toward me. Arriving at my side, he looked up at me, his amber eyes huge and sad in his little face, and his golden curls, neatly brushed for once, reminding me irresistibly of his mother.

"Goodnight, Daddy. I love you." He held out his arms, and I lifted him up onto my knee, hugging him fiercely.

I knew his empathic powers were strong enough for him to feel my complete sincerity as I whispered back, "I love you, too, Marcus. I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier."

Marcus wriggled free of my hug, still sitting on my knee and looking up at me earnestly.

"S'OK. Mommy said you didn't mean it. She said you just want to take care of us." His expression was so solemn and full of concern that I couldn't help but smile as I tousled his curls, messing them into their usual chaos.

"Mommy's a smart lady, Marcus." I looked up to see Deborah standing in the doorway, watching us with a soft smile on her face. "You should always listen to your Mommy. I should listen to her more, too. She makes a lot of sense." I kissed my son again, and stood to carry him to his bedroom. He snuggled against my shoulder and sent out a little wave of love and happiness, making me hug him even more tightly. I really don't deserve such a sweet-natured child. He doesn't take after me at all.

When Marcus was snuggled down in bed, the covers pulled over him, Deborah moved to my side, and slid her arm around my waist. We stood for a moment, watching our son drift into sleep then Deborah took my hand and pulled me out of Marcus' room, and on into our quarters. When we arrived in our bedroom, she turned and slid into my arms, kissing me gently.

I hugged her even harder than I'd held Marcus, turning the kiss from loving and affectionate into passion in a moment. When we finally broke for breath, Deborah looked up at me and smiled, lifting her hand to brush back the hair that had fallen over my forehead.

"You need rest. Let's have an early night."

I told you my wife was smart.

We made love, relieving all the stresses and the strains of the day, then she held me in her arms until I fell asleep.

1st March 2273

Matheson

The Lion surged through the jump-gate into the Epsilon Delta 457 system, with Ranger Fillion at the helm and Teri Stewart acting as co-pilot and running sensors. Casu and I stood behind their seats, our feet now held to the deck-plates by magnetic boots, watching out of the front viewscreen. We didn't really expect to see anything, but it can never hurt to have an additional visual check.

As we moved toward the moon where we were due to rendezvous with the Raiders, Fillion pulled up a map of the system, and displayed it on a side-screen. While it didn't have the versatility of the Excalibur's map table, it gave us an idea of how the planets and moons were arranged.

As usual, the sun was circled by several small, rocky planets, holding the inner orbits. None of these planets were big enough to have anything like a decent atmosphere, and they were all therefore uninhabited. Further out, four large gas giants orbited, each surrounded by a cluster of moons.

It was the first of these giants for which we were headed, and in particular, one of its many moons. The one we were going to had a dense but poisonous atmosphere, made up mostly of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and methane. Just the thought of how that atmosphere would smell was enough to make my eyes water. Fortunately, we had no intention of landing.

Circling the same gas giant, but in a closer orbit than our rendezvous point, were the rocky remains of another moon. It appeared to have disintegrated under the force of the tidal strains created by its close proximity to the strong gravitational field of the planet. The resulting debris field was made up of fragments too large to form a ring around the gas giant. Instead, it created what was more like an asteroid belt, inside which I hoped the Excalibur was hiding. As we moved toward the moon where we were due to meet with Talia, it became apparent that the Excalibur wasn't the only ship hiding in that field.

Teri sounded the alert as soon as the ship emerged from behind one of the larger asteroids. "Mal..." She pointed to one of her sensor screens, which displayed a clear image of the new arrival. It was spherical in shape, and I recognized it instantly. It was an old Asimov class liner, adapted to act as transporter and cargo carrier. Although it was painted in the standard green and white livery of that class of ship, I recognized it at once, and felt my throat close in panic.

I had thought all those ships destroyed in the Telepath War. The existence of a fleet of Psi Corps motherships had been widely known within the Corps, but toward the end of the War, I had been part of a rebel group dedicated to wiping out that fleet. Friends of mine had sacrificed their lives in suicide missions to destroy those ships. The fact that one remained intact was an affront to the memories of my lost comrades.

I gritted my teeth and hid my fear as the sphere approached us, warning Fillion of what might await us in a calm and controlled voice. I think it was controlled, anyway. It might have wavered a little, as Fillion

looked at me with concern as I warned him.

"Captain Fillion, that ship could be filled with four hundred or more Telepaths. If they have high ratings, or if they join together to attack, they can overwhelm any shield I can put in place in an instant. I can't guarantee I'll be able to protect us this time."

Fillion nodded his understanding. "Just do your best, John, that's all I can ask."

But what if my best wasn't good enough? I wasn't prepared to let him down, and the seeds of a plan for how I might protect him better began to form in my mind. To ensure its success, I sent a single thought along a mental pathway known only to one other person.

Fillion rose from his seat and allowed Casu to take his place at the controls, gesturing for me to precede him as we left the bridge. We deactivated our magnetic boots and floated to the nearest hatch then pushed ourselves down the ladder into the cargo hold. As we floated down, I sighed and told Fillion that I would have to get back into my crate.

"Mal, if that is a Psi Corps ship--and I'm almost certain it is--it's possible I could be recognized by one of the teeps on board. I can monitor you from inside the crate without being seen."

Mal gave me a regretful grin, "I guess you're right. At least that crate is more comfortable now. You shouldn't get cramps this time."

We floated across the hold, quickly setting up a surveillance camera and a link to a small viewscreen, which we hooked onto the inside of my crate. Then Mal helped me inside. I didn't bother to strap myself in, as I could float comfortably in the weightless environment. We'd just finished in time, as at that moment a red light flashed on the airlock, and we knew our visitor had arrived.

Fillion nodded to me then quickly dropped the cover of the crate into place, plunging me into darkness except for the light coming from the small viewscreen. He hadn't latched the cover closed, and air still circulated into the crate, so at least I didn't need to wear a breather. I watched the screen as the Ranger moved to the airlock, operating the controls, then opening the inner door to admit a single space-suited figure.

As the helmet was lifted from the figure's shoulders, I just knew there was going to be trouble. It was time for Plan B. I put up the strongest blocking field I could, as Talia shook out her long blonde hair.

Gideon

I'd just arrived back on the bridge when the Lion appeared through the Jumpgate, exactly on schedule.

We all watched as the little ship moved through the system toward the moon where she was due to rendezvous with the Raiders. I had all weapons primed and the main gun on line, just in case the Lion was attacked. Lochley may have wanted us to capture the Psi Corps ship, but if it showed any signs of attacking the Lion, I had my own plans. Given a choice between keeping that ship intact at the cost of losing my XO and friend, I wouldn't hesitate. The Psi Corps ship would be dust.

The mothership moved from behind the moon where she'd been hiding and advanced on the Lion, making me and every other member of crew on the bridge very nervous indeed. Liz Lochley stood next to my chair

with her hand resting on the back, and out of the corner of my eye I could see how tightly her fingers gripped the seat. If she went on like that she could leave dents in the metal. Marcus stood on the other side of me, for once blessedly silent.

As the big sphere approached the smaller ship, it fired reverse thrusters and glided to a halt about a kilometer away from the Lion. It then released a shuttle from its flight deck, which swooped down on the Lion, maneuvering itself in close. Ankaren played with his scanners, until he was able to show us a close-up of the single person transferring from the shuttle to the Lion's airlock. I have no idea how Ankaren did that. He must have bounced a signal off heaven knows how many asteroids to get us that picture. I don't think anyone on the bridge so much as breathed as we watched the space-suited figure jet across the small gap between the ships and enter the airlock.

As the Lion's door closed behind the boarder, everyone on the bridge breathed again. We knew that whatever was going to happen would happen soon, at last putting an end to the waiting. I checked the weapons station and confirmed that we were ready to fight, then glanced over at helm and navigation. A course which would take us directly between the Lion and the mothership was already plotted and programmed in. All the helmsman would have to do was hit the command, and we'd move so fast the mothership wouldn't know what had hit them.

If I was going to get rid of Lochley before she learned too much, this was the time to do it. I'd planned what I needed to do if this eventuality arose, so I looked up anxiously at her. "General, this is where I have to ask you to trust me. I need your help, but not on the Excalibur. Usually, if we have to fight, John co-ordinates the fighters, while I take care of the Excalibur's weapons. Without John here, I'm a little short-handed. I could ask you to look after that side of things, but to be honest, if we need the fighters, we could run our defense much more effectively if you were out there with them."

Liz had helped me out that way once before, but now she looked down at me with eyes narrowed. "What makes me think you're trying to get rid of me, Captain?" She knows me too well.

I shrugged and stayed silent, waiting for her response. She shook her head and smiled, turning on her heel and starting to leave the bridge, headed for the fighter launch bays. I called after her, feeling guilty about having manipulated her. Liz paused just long enough for me to say, "Be careful. Your daughter's going to need both of her mothers around."

Lochley gave me a quick grin and a sketchy salute then left the bridge at a run. I turned back to the front of the bridge, but before I could open my mouth to give any orders, the sound of running feet behind me made me turn again. I grimaced as Lily flung herself onto the bridge, with Deborah and Angel right behind her. The little red-head was so out of breath she could hardly speak, and it took me a couple of seconds to understand what she was saying.

"Jo...John linked with me. He says he may need our help. Get the map table running." She eventually managed to pant out the words, and I leaped from my chair to run through to the back section of the bridge, calling orders to the crew man on duty there to put up a projection of the Lion and the mothership.

Marcus followed me closely, asking, "What help? How did John make contact?"

While I wasn't too worried about what the Ranger learned--he'd proved after his adventure on B5 with Angel that he could keep the sisters' secrets, as had my bridge crew, who had revealed nothing about how exactly we had come out of the incident over Stryvsteptixi--I really didn't have time to answer him. I waved at him to watch and learn. Deborah, Angel and Lily now stood around the map table, above which the

scene outside was projected. They reached out to hold each other's hands and closed their eyes. They held their positions for a moment, then Deborah opened her eyes again, and gave me an anguished look. "I'm not sure if we're strong enough to do this any more. Oh God, Matthew, what have I done?"

My wife had found out several months before that the energy powering the merge between her and her sisters--the merge necessary for them to both attack and defend themselves--had come from the part of a Vorlon she had unknowingly carried inside her for years. Unable to live with that knowledge, she had spiraled down into a deep depression, which was only relieved when we'd found a way to communicate with the Vorlon, and it had agreed to withdraw into hibernation. Now the sisters needed the power of the Vorlon, and it wasn't there for them to draw on.

Before I could answer, Angel pulled sharply on Deborah's hand, dragging my wife's attention away from me. Angel's voice was almost savage as she growled, "Stop whining about it, and do your best. We have to help Lily. Now focus!"

I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk to Deborah like that before. I certainly wouldn't try it. But it seemed to work. My wife closed her eyes again, and I saw the fear drain from her face as she focused her mind and energies on helping her sisters.

I knew there was nothing more I could do, so I turned to Marcus and said, "Stay with them, will you? Make sure they're safe."

Marcus gave me a serious nod, so I returned to the front of the bridge, watching anxiously, ready to give the order to attack.

Matheson

I watched as Talia shook out her hair and glared narrow-eyed at Fillion, then I felt her mental energies lift as yet again she tried to deep-scan him. As before, her mind bounced off the mental wall I had erected.

Fillion said nothing. He held out the datapad on which the weapons inventory was recorded, and gestured to the crates surrounding him in the hold. "I think you'll find everything present and accounted for."

Talia took the pad and scrutinized it for a few seconds. Then she looked up and her expression was filled with malicious pleasure as she asked, "Remind me what price we agreed, Captain?"

Fillion stayed calm, although I felt his mind stir uncomfortably. He knew this wasn't going according to plan. Talia wasn't following the script.

"You know the price. One and a half million credits. I have a hyperspace connection open to my bank in New Vegas. As soon as the sum is deposited, the weapons are yours." Fillion spoke slowly and carefully, his voice expressionless.

Talia's smile spread, becoming even more malevolent. "No, I don't think so, Captain Fillion. I don't think we're going to pay you a single credit."

Fillion stayed calm and controlled as he withdrew the datapad. "Then the deal is off. I'll find another buyer."

Talia shook her head, her smooth blonde hair whipping around her face. "Incorrect. In fact, you're going to let me take all these weapons out of here. Then you're going to tell me everything I want to know, including where all this equipment came from, and how you got hold of it. By the time I'm finished, there'll be nothing left in your brain that I'm not aware of."

Fillion's mental patterns stirred again, and I knew Talia's threats disturbed him. As well they should. The blonde bitch had me scared half to death. The Ranger showed no sign of his fears as he asked, "And just how are you going to do that, Talia?" A PPG had appeared in his hand as if by magic. If you'd asked me, I would have sworn Fillion was unarmed, but somehow that gun was plucked from thin air.

Talia laughed harshly. "That won't do you any good, Fillion. It's about as much use as the puny mental shield you're holding up. I still don't know how you're doing that, but it won't help you for much longer. This time I have a few friends with me, and together we'll bring your walls tumbling down. Just call me Joshua, why don't you?"

The smile on the blonde telepath's face was one of the scariest things I have ever seen, and at that moment I found it hard to remember that she was more a victim of Psi Corps than anyone I'd ever met before. I felt her link minds with others, then sensed a build up of mental power, as teep after teep joined in a mental merge, which started to attack my shield. I knew I had only seconds before it all came crashing down, and in the time I had, I did the only thing possible.

I screamed for help like I've never screamed before.

Gideon

It didn't take long before everything happened at once. I watched as Lily whispered something to Marcus, her eyes still closed. The Ranger jumped across to my chair and said in a low voice, "Lily says John called her again. They have the block up and it's holding."

He ran back to the map-room, leaving me to turn my attention to the viewscreen. The mothership had started to move toward the Lion again and I yelled a command at helm to get us moving. I then ordered the fighters out of the bays, watching in satisfaction as Lochley led the charge on the Psi Corps ship.

I knew this battle wasn't going to be easy, and that fact was reinforced as the big sphere launched wave after wave of her own fighters. They must have picked us up on their sensors as soon as we emerged from behind our asteroid, and she now turned to attack us, leaving her fighters to take care of the Lion. I had to admire their spirit; the Excalibur was three times the size of the mothership, and heavily outgunned her. The problem was that I couldn't use my main gun, which left me fighting with one hand tied behind my back.

I yelled at Siddhartha on Communications to call the Lion and tell them to get their butt moving. I wanted that ship inside the Excalibur's landing bay, where she would be safe. Siddhartha sent the message, but didn't waste time trying to repeat their answer. She put Teri Stewart on the loudspeaker where we all could hear her.

"Sorry, Captain, but there's no way we're going to make it over there. There's too many of those fighters between us and you. We'll just put our back to this moon and slug it out. Lion out."

The comm. channel cut off, and I told Siddhartha to get me Lochley. "General, can you get your fighters

over to the Lion and defend them? They're well armed, but not as maneuverable as the enemy. They could get cut up by that swarm. The Excalibur can look after herself."

Lochley acknowledged my request tersely, and cut off. I could now devote my attention to the mothership, knowing I had done everything I could for the Lion. I waved at Siddhartha to open a general broadcast channel.

"This is Captain Matthew Gideon, commanding the ISA ship Excalibur, to unidentified vessel. Disengage your weapons and call back your fighters, or be fired upon. The ship you are attacking is under the protection of the ISA. Surrender or be destroyed."

I didn't expect them to surrender, of course, but I had to give them the option. Those are the rules of engagement, and much as I sometimes hate them, I try to stick to them when I can. The rules are what make the difference between an army and a band of pirates. Sometimes I think I would have made a damned good pirate. One day I'll send one of the crew who has particularly annoyed me outside to paint a skull and crossbones on the Excalibur's hull, and I'll get myself a parrot.

The mothership didn't disappoint. We certainly had her attention, as she headed straight for us, leaving her fighters to deal with the smaller ship. For a moment, I thought she was going to ram us, but then I realized she was trying to get behind one of the nearby asteroids. Not a chance. The Excalibur is a big ship, but she's more maneuverable than she looks. I ordered helm to take us into the asteroid field after our prey.

The next few moments were tense as Lieutenant Roberts steered us into the debris. I wasn't too worried by the rocks surrounding us. The Excalibur's hull was thick enough to take a few direct hits, as long as the rocks weren't too big. I trusted Roberts to avoid the ones the size of mountains.

While I had a moment to breathe, I did one more thing I wished I'd been able to do earlier. "Lieutenant Siddhartha, open a channel and get a scrambled message through to Minbar. Call for as many White Stars as can get here quickly, preferably with telepaths on board. We need all the help we can get." I knew it was useless. The chances of there being anyone close enough to help us were remote. But now we were out in the open we had nothing to lose.

Marcus Cole must have waited until he saw that I was momentarily free of distractions, as it was then he called out, "Um, Captain? Perhaps you could just take a look? Is this normal?"

I turned in my chair and what I saw was nothing like normal. Deborah, Angel and Lily stood around the table, which still displayed a view of the Lion, but now it showed the dogfight going on around the smaller ship. The Excalibur's fighters were shown in red and the enemy fighters in green. It was obvious Lochley was winning, but I winced as one of the red lights flared and died. I'd just lost a member of my crew.

What bothered me even more was the strange shadow that hung around my wife and her sisters. Every time I'd seen the sisters link before, they'd always been surrounded by a field of white light, but not this time. I wondered if that light had somehow been generated by the Vorlon, as it had always seemed to be initiated by Deborah, then flowed to her sisters. Now the Vorlon slept, there was no energy coming from there, but the sisters seemed to have found another source.

This time, the field seemed to flow from Angel, and instead of light it was dark. It looked like a black fog that hung around them, ebbing and flowing, swirling in slow, almost liquid, motions. Just the sight of it

sent shivers down my spine, and I wondered where this power was coming from. I could only hope that it was giving Lily the energy she needed to maintain her block.

When she had blocked the Joneses and their bloodhounds, Lily had been able to maintain her shield against over one hundred teeps without any great effort, just needing her sisters to help her recharge her energies periodically. This time, she was trying to block perhaps four hundred or more teeps, many of whom could be P12 rated, all of whom could be merged into a focused attack on the Lion or the Excalibur, and she didn't have the energy of a Vorlon to call on. I hoped Lily could sustain her shields, but when I saw how pale she looked, I worried. I wished that Luke Raven could be with his wife to support her, but he was needed down in Medbay, waiting for any casualties that might arise from the battle ahead.

I looked at Marcus and chewed my lip. "I've never seen that before, but they usually know what they're doing. Stay with them, please."

Marcus nodded his agreement, turning back to watch the sisters with a frown. I paused then added, "If they collapse, try to catch Deborah, will you? She's bigger than the others, so she'll hit the deck harder."

I tried to make a joke of my concerns, but the look Marcus gave me showed he knew how I really felt. I had no idea what Marcus might be able to do for the sisters if they did collapse, but I felt a little better, knowing he was there.

There was little I could do to help Lily directly, but maybe I could distract the teeps on board the mothership. I swung back in my chair and gave my orders.

"Open fire on that ship. Target engines and weapons. Try to keep her in one piece, but if you have to, destroy her."

I'd worry about answering to Lochley later.

Matheson

As I started to scream in my head, I felt Lily's block snap into place. My beautiful wife had saved me again. The shield she had brought up was so complete I felt as if part of my brain had gone numb.

Very carefully, I sent a thought along a particular mental channel, trying to contact Lily as she had taught me when the Joneses had been on board the Excalibur. It didn't work. My thought bounced off a shield so hard, it felt like a wall of diamond a kilometer high and two deep. I had no idea where Lily was finding the power to create that strong a block, as it was unlike anything I'd felt before.

All this happened in a spilt second, and I shook my head, focusing on the viewscreen again just in time to see Talia scream and launch herself at Fillion. The Ranger didn't even blink. He dropped the PPG and met her charge with a fist. His right hook took the telepath right on her chin and she flew in a perfect parabola backwards across the hold, smashing into the far wall, and bouncing off again.

Her body span end over end as she gently bounced from one side of the hold to another. Fillion winced and shook his head, then pushed himself across to my crate and lifted the cover, grinning in at me. "I guess the game's up. Do you want to stay in there?"

His words were reinforced by a sudden thump on the outside of the hull, loud enough to startle me and

strong enough to bounce me almost clear out of the crate. Fillion held onto the side, then reached in to help me glide out into the cargo bay. Talia was still floating around, so we each reached up with one hand, while hanging onto the crate with the other. We managed to snag her feet, hauling her down to join us. When we had her body held between us, Fillion felt her pulse and nodded.

"She's just unconscious. We need to keep her that way. Now where shall we put her?" Another impact on the hull made it obvious we needed to move quickly, so I nodded at the crate.

"If we strap her arms inside the webbing, it should hold her nicely."

Fillion laughed. "And there I was thinking you were getting possessive about your crate. That's a generous offer, John. I think that'll do nicely."

So with the sound of energy bolts hitting the hull, and with the added difficulties of getting bounced around with every impact, we somehow secured Talia inside the crate. Fillion did another conjuring trick and pulled a hypo-spray out of nowhere. He injected something into Talia's neck, then looked up at me and smiled. "Relax. It's just a sedative. It'll keep her under for a few hours." Rangers are resourceful people.

When we were done, Fillion grinned at me. "I'm going up to the bridge to give Teri a piece of my mind. She's letting us get hit way too often. Maybe you could go down to the weapons pod and give Andrei a hand? I'm sure he'd appreciate it."

With a laconic salute, Fillion boosted himself up the ladder and through the hatch above, while I span myself around and pushed off toward the back of the ship.

Weightlessness isn't as much fun as it's made out to be, especially in a battle. If this went on much longer, I was definitely going to vomit. That or have my atoms spread across space. I just had to hope the Excalibur was doing her best to make sure the latter didn't happen.

Gideon

I was getting seriously annoyed. The bastards on board the mothership just didn't know when to quit. Lochley and my fighters had finished off all their smaller ships, and had then joined the Excalibur in hunting down the big sphere. No matter where she ran, or where she tried to hide, we followed. Time after time we hit her, but she wouldn't surrender.

Her guns were making some nasty dents in the Excalibur's hull, and I don't take kindly to people who scratch my ship's nice shiny surface.

I made damned sure that the mothership couldn't get past us and away from the gas giant by getting Lochley to spread the fighters around us in a spherical net formation. I knew that if the Psi Corps ship had enough space between her and the gravity well, she'd open a Jump-point and be through it like a rabbit down a hole. I really didn't want to carry out a running battle in hyperspace if I could avoid it, even against a much weaker ship. Odd things can happen in hyperspace, and you can never be sure of the outcome of any fight.

So we kept pecking away at the enemy, all the time having to be careful not to actually blow her up, and also making sure we didn't hole her so badly that we'd kill all her crew. We wanted them alive, not dead. At least Lochley did. I couldn't have cared less at that point.

I was worried about what was going on behind me at the map table, too. The sisters were still linked, but I could see the exhaustion in their faces every time I glanced around. As I ordered another round of fire on the enemy, Marcus appeared at my elbow.

He said quietly, "We need to end this soon, Captain. I don't think they can keep this up much longer."

I glanced around again and I could see he was right. The sisters were all trembling, their hands shaking where they held onto each other. I shook my head. "I could end this in a second if I could use the main gun, but that's not what you and Lochley want, is it? And if that ship full of teeps isn't blocked in the way only Lily can, they could turn their attentions on us and turn our brains inside out, couldn't they?"

Marcus nodded gravely. He knew we were in an impossible position.

"I tell you something, Marcus. At the first sign that Lily's block is failing, I'm taking that ship out." Marcus went to protest, but he paused as I looked up at him and asked, "Do you want them to capture us? They could you know, if they're all teeps as you think they are. They could take our minds apart and then take the Excalibur. Now that's a really scary thought, isn't it?"

It was one I'd been trying to avoid ever since I'd realized what the other ship really was: a ship full of hostile telepaths, who could suck my brains dry.

Marcus had no answer for me, so I turned back to my war of attrition, cursing the mothership's stubbornness.

The next impact that rocked the Excalibur came out of nowhere. It was powerful enough to almost spill me from my chair, and Marcus had to hang onto the back to stay upright.

"What the fuck was that?" I barked at Ankaren, who was running his fingers rapidly over his sensor boards. He froze in place, and instead of answering me, he pointed up at the screen.

Coming out from under the belly of my ship, firing as it went, rocking us back and forth and scoring the hull badly, was a ship of a configuration I'd seen twice in my life before. It was one of the Shadow Hybrids that had destroyed the Cerberus.

Matheson

Andrei and I were sitting back, taking a break, when Teri called down from the bridge. We'd just been congratulating ourselves on what a great job we'd done in clearing our skies of the enemy fighters--with a little help from the Excalibur's Star-furies, of course. Lily was still maintaining a complete telepathic block in that part of space, which meant the teeps on board the mothership couldn't attack us mentally, but I was worried about how much strain that would be causing my beautiful little red-head.

"John? Could you get up here? There's a new ship just appeared, and it's attacking the Excalibur. I've never seen anything quite like it, but..." She trailed off, then continued, "Just get your butt up here, will you?"

I frowned at Gagarin, who shrugged and said, "Better do what the lady asks. When Teri says 'jump', I usually ask how high."

I unfastened the safety harness that had kept me strapped into the seat in the weapons pod next to Andrei, and pushed myself up through the hatch above me. During the fight, I had manned one bank of guns covering the port side of the Lion, while Andrei had manned the starboard batteries.

We'd been pretty effective at taking out anything that came within range, pushing the enemy fighters back into the path of the Excalibur's fighters, until the enemy ships were all destroyed. From where the Lion was positioned, we couldn't actually see the Excalibur, although we knew she was playing cat and mouse games with the Psi Corps ship, in a hit and run battle through the asteroid field.

I knew my Captain would be chewing his lip in frustration at being unable to destroy the enemy vessel outright. Matthew was a direct man; he liked using his main gun to blow things up. Tiptoeing around trying to capture enemy ships really wasn't his style at all.

I bounced my way along with main corridor of the Lion, wishing Teri could start spinning us again, while wondering what this new ship might be and where it had come from. Did the Psi Corps ship have allies? If so, who were they? And why had they waited until now to arrive?

My first question was answered as soon as I stuck my head inside the bridge.

I rarely use profanity, but this was one of those special occasions that merited the use of obscene language.

"Oh fuck."

It was my Captain's favorite swearword and it seemed justified.

I recognized the ship attacking the Excalibur at once. Fillion had moved the Lion to a position where we were partially shielded by one of the larger asteroids, but could still see the Excalibur and the Psi Corps ship on the long distance scanners. We had a ringside seat for the battle.

Fillion swung around in his seat to look at me, his eyebrows raised. He didn't know me very well, but that was the first time he had heard me swear. I pointed at the ship attacking the Excalibur, moving so fast that it was hard for my ship to keep her guns targeted on the alien vessel.

"Do you know what that thing is?" I asked.

Fillion nodded. "I've seen pictures in Ranger training manuals that look very similar. It's some sort of leftover Shadow tech, isn't it? And isn't it interesting that it should appear now, just as that mothership was about to be forced to surrender?"

I shook my head. "It's not just a Shadow Tech ship, Captain. It's a Shadow Tech ship that's identical to the one that destroyed the old Earth Alliance ship, Cerberus. That ship was lost with all hands in 2259. All hands but one. The survivor was one Ensign Matthew Gideon, who vowed to find the ship that killed his friends and crewmates, and destroy it."

I pointed at the viewscreen again, where we could now see the Psi Corps mothership turning to run while the Excalibur was fully occupied with the Shadow hybrid.

"Gideon won't... can't abandon the fight with that ship to stop the mothership. If he turns his back on the Shadow ship, it could damage the Excalibur badly. It's incredibly powerful-maybe even powerful enough

to take out the Excalibur. The only thing we know that can destroy one of those ships is the Excalibur's main gun, and Gideon can't use that weapon. If he does, he'll be dead in the water for a minute afterwards, and the Psi Corps ship will move in and hit him with everything they've got left. We have to do something, Fillion. Anything."

Fillion looked at me in silence for a moment then nodded tersely. He waved at Teri to open a communication channel, then looked up and gave me a reassuring smile.

"This ain't over 'til it's over, John. We're not out of options just yet."

Gideon

I almost levitated out of my seat when I saw what was attacking us. I'd beaten one of those ships over Stryvstextixi, but I'd feared that it wasn't the only one out in deep space. The last words I'd heard from an inhabitant of that planet echoed in my head as I watched the Shadow ship swing around for another attack.

"You may have destroyed much of our fleet and even one of our masters' ships..."

'One of our masters' ships.' Just one of them. I had no idea if I had blown up the ship that had destroyed the Cerberus, or if it had been just one of a fleet of ships of the same design. Now I was fighting another, and I wanted to see it in pieces spread all across my sky. But how many more of them were out there? How many more would I have to hunt down and destroy before the ghosts of the crew of the Cerberus would leave my dreams undisturbed?

I cursed as I realized I couldn't use the only weapon I knew would be effective against the Shadow vessel. If I used my main gun, we'd be a sitting duck for the Psi Corps mothership. I glanced at the screen showing that ship, and saw she was trying to sneak away under cover of the Shadow's attack. Fortunately, Lochley and Fillion had seen what she was up to, and the Lion and the fighters had moved to surround her. Without the Excalibur, they couldn't defeat the battle-sphere, but at least they could try to stop her escaping.

At a price.

I winced as another of my fighters flared and died in front of my eyes. Another life lost. If I didn't find a way to defeat the Shadow ship without the use of my main gun, we were going to lose a lot more lives. And just to make it even more interesting, I couldn't call on the sisters' powers to help me this time.

The next couple of hours were sheer hell. The Shadow ship kept coming around to attack us again and again, knocking chunks out of the Excalibur on every pass. Maybe one time in three we managed to hit the enemy as it went past us. It was so damned quick that my gunnery crews just couldn't maintain a lock on it. They were shooting by eye, and they performed miracles to hit it at all. But nothing we threw at it seemed to slow it down.

Damage reports were coming in from every deck, and we were holed in several places. So far, we'd managed to seal off the decompressed areas without loss of life, but I knew it was only a matter of time before we suffered our first fatalities. Luke Raven was taking casualties into Medbay, patching them up and getting them back on duty again as fast as his people could work, but with every pass of that Shadow from hell, some of my crew were hurt too badly to go on fighting.

The Lion and the fighters led by Liz Lochley were performing miracles, too. Somehow they had managed to keep the Psi Corps mothership penned up against the gas giant's gravity field, and stopped her escaping through a jump-point, but the huge sphere was still a threat. Enough of a threat to keep me from using the main gun. Whenever I got chance, I threw a few energy bolts in their direction, just to warn them to stay clear, but I knew damned well that at the first sign of weakness from the Excalibur, that mothership would do its utmost to take us out.

The last miracle workers were my wife and her sisters. Three of my crew were now having to hold them upright, but somehow they hung on. Somehow, Deborah and Angel kept feeding Lily the energy she needed to keep the telepathic block going. Without that block, we might all have succumbed to the mental attack of the enemy teeps hours before.

An hour earlier, Deborah had dropped out of the link for a brief rest. I'd taken a few seconds to join her as she'd slumped against the rear wall of the map room. She looked tired to the point of exhaustion, and her eyes were full of pain and fear as she'd leaned against my shoulder and whispered, "They never let up. They keep battering away at Lily's block, never giving her a moment of respite. I'm not sure how much longer she can do this. And Matthew, the children are frightened. Please, send someone to be with them. We can feel them through our link; we can feel their fear. It's killing Lily not to go to her babies, and I want desperately to comfort Marcus, but we can't. We can't stop and we can't leave, and Angel is drawing strength from somewhere deep inside her, somewhere she shouldn't go, and..."

Deborah had pulled herself together and stopped talking. She gave me a brave smile and kissed me gently, before saying, "Send Marcus down to the children, please. He can help them stay calm. They'll trust him."

So now the Ranger was babysitting our children in the Medbay crèche, and my wife had rejoined the link with her sisters, somehow helping them, keeping us all from being overwhelmed by the mental forces lined up against us. While they fought their mental battle, I was losing the physical war.

The Shadow Tech ship was coming in for another attack, and I knew this time we'd take severe damage. I had no guns left on the port bow, and it was coming in on a vector aimed directly at that part of my ship. I yelled at helm to use thrusters to turn us, trying to get my starboard battery around far enough to defend us, knowing that we could never turn in time.

Siddhartha's voice rang out at that moment, clear as a bell in the silence that reigned on the bridge as we waited to be hit.

"I have an incoming message on the Rangers' channel, Captain."

I wondered who the hell would be calling us in the middle of a battle, but decided that I had nothing better to do while waiting to be pounded into space-dust.

"Put it through, Lieutenant."

The voice that came through was lightly accented but clear.

"This is Entil'zha Delemn, calling the ISA ship Excalibur. Stand by to receive reinforcements."

Before the sentence was complete, jump-points started opening all around us, blossoming like flowers against the darkness of space. Through every jump-point surged a White Star, firing as they came, all

targeting the Shadow Tech invader. My bridge crew started whooping with delight, knowing that the cavalry had just arrived, and they were riding to our rescue.

The enemy ship veered off from its attack at the last minute, trying to escape the numerous ships that were now maneuvering to surround it. I've never seen so many White Stars in one place, and I sat open-mouthed in amazement as even more jump-points blossomed, and more and more ships surged through.

Eventually, there must have been forty or more of the ISA ships converging on the Shadow vessel, all firing together, giving it no respite from their energy bolts. Incredibly, the Shadow ship held up under the rain of fire. It seemed to absorb the energy being thrown at it, sucking it into the blacker than space darkness of its hull. Despite the sheer number of ships surrounding it, I could see there was a danger it might still escape them.

That was something I couldn't allow.

Turning to my weapons officer, I called out the command I'd been waiting to use for hours.

"Target the alien vessel and fire the main gun."

In an instant the blinding white beam of the most powerful weapon ever built by man lashed out from the front of the Excalibur, spearing the Shadow vessel as it battled the surrounding fleet of White Stars. All power in the Excalibur died as the main gun drained our reactors, leaving us with only sensors and life-support.

We didn't need more, as the White Stars now surged away to surround the Psi Corps mothership, holding her off our back, while we slowly recovered. When the viewscreen at the front of the bridge finally came back to life, I felt a huge surge of satisfaction as I looked out on the field of debris that had once been the Shadow Tech ship. Now I'd got two of those bastards.

I grinned across at my weapons officer. "Nice shooting, Chang."

Ensign Chang grinned back, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment at the compliment.

Siddhartha called out again, warning me that I had another incoming communication. This time, Delenn's image accompanied her voice, and I found myself smiling at the wife of the President of the ISA and the head of the Rangers. She looked more beautiful to me right then than she ever had before. Before she could speak I asked, "How did you get here so soon?"

Delenn said, "Ranger Fillion advised us of the likely involvement of telepaths before he left Babylon 5, so I brought Minbari telepaths with me. I will not ask exactly how you have maintained the telepathic block that has prevented the mothership from overwhelming you, but you can cease your efforts in that area. We will take over now."

I acknowledged Delenn's advice with a nod, and her image disappeared from the screen. At that moment, I heard a groan and a thud from behind me. I spun around in my chair in time to see all three sisters collapse. The crewmen supporting Angel and Lily had caught them before they had fallen, but my wife had proved too much for the man trying to carry her weight.

As I leaped from my chair and ran to the map room, Crewman Fielding looked up at me and cringed. "I

tried, Captain, but I couldn't hold her."

Sliding to my knees, I pulled Deborah into my arms and smiled at Fielding. "It's OK. She's tough. She won't break."

I pushed Deborah's hair back from her ashen face, then pressed my fingers to her neck. Her pulse was slow but strong, and I breathed a sigh of relief. A quick check with the two crewmen caring for Angel and Lily reassured me that they had suffered no physical harm, as far as a cursory inspection could ascertain, but I wanted all three women in Medbay as soon as possible. Calling for medics, I began to give orders to the damage control teams from my seat on the floor of the bridge, feeling a strong sense of déjà vue, combined with immense irritation.

Ranger Fillion's foresight had saved all of our lives. I was actually going to have to feel grateful to the bastard. You have no idea how annoying that thought was.

2nd March 2273

Gideon

It was really late--or not so early, depending on your point of view--before I got back to my quarters that night. There was a lot of work to be done to bring the Excalibur back up to full operating capacity, but it was all underway, and everyone knew what was needed of them. Technically, I'd still been on duty, having no one to whom I was willing to hand over command who could relieve me, but I knew if I didn't get some sleep, I'd be dead on my feet and fit for nothing by morning. So I'd headed for my bed, leaving strict instructions that I was to be called if anything--and I do mean anything--happened.

On my way home I'd been down to Medbay, receiving Luke Raven's report as I'd visited the injured. We'd lost six people in all, five of them Starfury pilots, and one crewman who had died when the port bow gun battery was taken out. I'd have to write to their families later, explaining how they died, and how many lives had been saved by their actions. It was a task I hated, but it came with the job.

We had a fair number of walking wounded, but only three people who Luke had insisted on keeping in Medbay. Others had been sent back to their quarters with orders to stay there until the medics passed them as fit for duty.

One of the three confined to Medbay was Christina Jackson, which is why I had no one to relieve me of bridge duty. She'd been down in Engineering during the battle and had caught the full blast of an explosion when the Shadow Tech ship had first hit us. She had a lot of internal injuries, and quite a few burns. Luke had assured me that she was going to be fine, but she wouldn't be back on duty for a few weeks. He'd then told me that he was staying in Medbay for the night to monitor his remaining patients, having sent most of his medics off duty to get some sleep.

I'd sat by Christina's bed for a while, holding her hand as she lay there unmoving, and telling her about the outcome of the battle. After a few minutes, she'd opened one eye and rasped out at me that I was keeping her awake. Her voice was rough from smoke inhalation, but she had enough energy left to chuckle hoarsely and tell me to go home to my family. One way or another, I'm going to make damned sure that Christina gets rewarded for her work on board the Excalibur. She deserves a goddamn medal for putting up with me.

So having received my orders from my Second Officer, I went home to the other woman who deserves a medal for putting up with me.

The lights in the living room were turned down low, so I knew Deborah had gone to bed. Luke had checked her and her sisters over while I was still on the bridge, putting the ship back together, but he'd told me they were just exhausted and needed sleep, so he'd hustled them out of Medbay, and sent them home.

I was yawning and longing for my bed, but on the way there I did a small detour into my son's room. To my surprise, he wasn't alone. Curled up in bed with Marcus were Dasha and Faylinn.

The three children were wrapped around each other like a litter of puppies, and I couldn't help but smile at the sight of them. My son's blond curls contrasted with Dasha's thick mop of black hair on the pillow next to him, and Faylinn's strawberry blonde tresses fell across both of the boys as she snuggled in between them. Poor Faylinn was constantly trying to get between the boys when she was awake, so I guess it was only natural she'd do the same in her sleep. I checked that Half-Ted was safe on a shelf then I bent over to kiss each of them on the forehead. After that I straightened and turned to look into the cot that had been set up in the corner of Marcus' room.

Little Naima was fast asleep, her long eyelashes resting on her soft pink cheeks, hiding the amazing emerald green eyes she'd inherited from her mother. I stood for a moment, gently stroking her soft red hair, wondering for the millionth time if this was my daughter. Whether she was or she wasn't, little Naima would always hold a special place in my heart.

I stooped and kissed her forehead, then left the room, headed for my own bedroom, with a strong suspicion as to what I'd find there. I wasn't disappointed, but the sight that met my eyes when I walked in almost took my breath away.

Deborah lay in the center of the bed, wearing nothing but one of my t-shirts--a black one, of course--and a pair of panties. The t-shirt had ridden up to display her flat belly, and it clung to her generous breasts, making me want to climb straight into bed and start playing with her. Unfortunately, there was no room for me.

Lily and Angel lay on either side of Deborah, each curled up beside her, each with one of Deborah's arms around them. Lily wore a green silk negligee, with lacy panels barely covering her breasts, clearly displaying her snake tattoo. For some reason I could hardly tear my eyes away from that tattoo. Odd, as I'm not normally fond of snakes.

But what awaited my gaze on Deborah's other side was enough to distract any man. Angel wore a pair of tight, red silk shorts, with a red silk top that strained to hold in her breasts. I stood for a while, wondering how the thin straps held up against the pressure being exerted by those firm globes. I have an enquiring mind, OK?

As I looked from one sister to the next, the pressure in my groin began to build so fast that I wondered whether my zipper might explode. I shook my head, looked down at myself and smiled. The only relief I was going to get that night was from my right hand.

Tiptoeing into the bathroom, I stripped and stepped into the vibe shower. The thought of how a real water shower would feel at that moment made me sigh with regret, but the vibe was better than nothing. I was just about to turn my attention to one rather outstanding issue when the door of the shower opened, and I turned to find my wife stepping inside to join me.

She was naked, and for a few seconds I just stood, enjoying the sight of her, from her slender feet, up her long legs, to her rounded hips and flat belly, her firm, full breasts, her wide shoulders, her long, elegant neck, and finally her beautiful face, with the warmest, most loving eyes in the galaxy gazing at me.

Deborah gave me a mischievous smile, then nodded at my erection. "Need a little help there, Captain? I can promise you an excellent service."

I took her in my arms and kissed her passionately, eventually breaking away to smile at her and say, "I've no doubt about the service, but can I afford the price?"

It was an old joke of ours and Deborah chuckled, rubbing her belly against my aching shaft. "Lucky for you, your son is now out of diapers, so it looks like you're going to get this servicing free."

Deborah dropped to her knees and took care of me as only she can.

Eventually, we curled up together on the sofa in the living room, with a spare quilt pulled around us. Deborah was wearing my t-shirt again, and I was grumbling about having to wear pajama bottoms because of our visitors then muttering about why couldn't Angel and Lily sleep on the couch. I was the Captain, wasn't I? The Captain should get to sleep in his own bed. I got swatted by my wife, who told me to shut up and go to sleep. With Deborah in my arms, it took about ten nanoseconds before I drifted off.

I yawned as I entered the conference room the following morning, pleased to see that the Excalibur was back in working order sufficiently for someone to have set up the coffee pot. The aroma of coffee permeated the room, and I inhaled deeply, sighing with pleasure as I poured myself a cup and took my first sip.

I'd managed to dress and slide out of my quarters without disturbing the sisters or the children, but in doing so, I'd skipped breakfast. After only four hours of sleep, I really needed that coffee to kick start me into action.

I'd finished my first cup and I was just pouring my second when the doors opened and Liz Lochley walked in. She smiled as she accepted the coffee I poured for her, then sat with her eyes closed, savoring the flavor in silence for a few moments. When she finally opened her eyes, she smiled up at me and said, "You look tired, Matt. How much sleep did you get?"

I shrugged. "Enough to last me for a while. What's important is that the Excalibur is back to full operational status," I'd checked the reports while drinking my first cup of coffee, "all of our wounded are recovering, and that ship is contained." I waved at the viewscreen, which displayed an image of the Psi Corps mothership.

My only regret at that point was that John had been unable to return to the Excalibur the night before. He'd left the Lion and transferred over to the Psi Corps mothership, ready to help the Minbari telepaths in controlling and interrogating the human teeps on board. I'd tried to tell John that he didn't need to do that, but he'd insisted, saying that as the only human telepath on our side, he could help the Minbari. I couldn't argue, so I'd been forced to accept his absence overnight. Now Lochley and I were waiting for DeLenn to join us, to brief us on how the interrogations were progressing.

The doors to the conference room opened again, and Deleenn entered, with Marcus Cole right behind her. Deleenn declined the offer of coffee, while Marcus grumbled about the lack of tea then drained the coffee pot. We settled to receive Deleenn's report.

The Entil'zha looked as calm and collected as always, her slightly accented voice low and controlled as she briefed us.

"We have not yet completed the interrogation of all the personnel on board the Psi Corps ship, but I should start by telling you that there were three hundred and seventy-six telepaths on board, ranging from P5 to P12 on the human scale of measurement. It took the combined power of all the Minbari telepaths I brought with me to overpower them. I have no idea how you held out against their attack for so long."

Deleenn looked at me quizzically, and I was very aware of Lochley's curious glance. I shrugged and said, "A lot of talent and a little luck, I guess. Or vice versa." I held Deleenn's eyes as I spoke, trying to ensure she left the subject alone. President Sheridan and his wife were well aware of the powers possessed by Deborah and her sisters, as without them we'd never have escaped from Centauri Prime after a failed mission the previous year.

The Minbari leader took the hint, nodded and continued, "We have confirmation that this was the last of the Psi Corps fleet. Having taken this group into custody, we can now be sure that the galaxy is free of this malign influence."

That was a huge relief. At least I'd never have to go up against one of those mothers again.

Deleenn looked at Lochley and said, "And we have a list of names of people in Earthforce who have been supporting this ship in particular and the Raiders in general."

Lochley nodded seriously, but made no comment. I knew how she felt. We could both only hope that no one we knew was on that list. Deleenn continued, "The list may not be complete, as there may be others of whom the prisoners do not know, but it should enable you to make a good start on your enquiries. When I left, the interrogation of Talia Winters was also still underway. I'm sure she will be able to tell us more."

Deleenn sighed and I could see the sadness in her eyes. I suddenly realized that she had probably known the previous personality that had inhabited Talia's body. The Entil'zha closed her eyes for a moment, then looked up and continued, "Marcus Cole will accompany you back to Earth, General, to assist with your further investigations."

Deleenn then turned to me and gave me a soft smile. "Your First Officer will return to you soon now. Ranger Fillion will bring him across in the Lion, which is in need of some repairs, and they should arrive later this morning. I know you'll be pleased to have him back. His support and assistance in this endeavor have been invaluable. You can be sure that both the President and I have taken note of his bravery and cooperation, and we will provide appropriate feedback to Earthforce."

I was delighted that John had made such a good impression, as it boded well for his future advancement. Before I could thank her, Deleenn continued, "And the same applies to you, Captain. This mission would have failed without your ability to keep the telepaths contained, and to keep fighting that Shadow Tech ship until reinforcements arrived. You have my congratulations, thanks and gratitude."

I think I might have blushed a little, as when I looked up, both Marcus and Lochley were grinning widely. Of course, there was a single cloud amongst all those silver linings. Fillion was on his way back to the

Excalibur. Great. Now I was going to have to thank the bastard.

Turning my mind to more important matters, I asked Delenn whether they had found out what relationship had existed between the mothership and the Shadow Tech vessel. Delenn shook her head.

"No, Captain, that is still unknown. But the investigation continues in my absence, so it is still possible that someone on the mothership knows the answer to that question. I will ensure you are advised if we find out."

I nodded my gratitude, while grinding my teeth in frustration. I was sure the telepaths had to have information on the Shadow Hybrid. It was an ally of theirs, so they must know where it came from. I was determined to find out more about those ships from hell, even if it meant going over to the mothership and personally beating the information out of each and every person on board. For the moment, I held my silence, but I didn't plan to let this issue rest.

After a lot more discussion, none of which was of great interest or importance, Delenn left to go back to her White Star, with Lochley escorting her down to the landing bay. I couldn't help wondering what the two women might talk about. Did the current and ex-wife of the President compare notes? If I'd been John Sheridan, I'd have done anything I could to keep those two apart. I guess that just goes to show that he's a better man than I am. OK, you didn't have to accept that statement quite so readily. You could have argued a little, just for the sake of good form.

Marcus Cole lingered, and looked at me with concern. "Captain, how are your wife and her sisters? When I had to leave to join Delenn, they'd been taken to Medbay to be checked out. I didn't like to ask earlier, while General Lochley was here."

I smiled and reassured Marcus. "They're all fine. Luke Raven has given them all a clean bill of health. And thanks for looking after the children during the battle. I really appreciate that."

Marcus laughed and said it had been a delightful experience. I wondered for a moment whether he'd been babysitting someone else's kids, as looking after my little tyke when he was in the same room as Faylinn could rarely be described as delightful.

"Your son kept telling us that everything was going to be all right because his Daddy was taking care of the ship, and you wouldn't let anything bad happen."

I could feel myself swelling with pride, but inevitably Marcus was ready to burst my balloon. "Little Dasha is very like his father, too. Talking of whom, John should be back in a little while, and so should Ranger Fillion. Is Angel in her quarters do you think?"

I gritted my teeth and told Marcus that the last time I'd seen Angel she'd been fast asleep in my bed. Then I stalked out of the conference room and onto the bridge. That should give the nosy Ranger something to think about.

Matheson

Mal followed me down the ramp of the Lion and into the landing bay, leaving the others to complete repairs on the little trading ship. She just fitted inside the Excalibur's flight deck, and I'd invited them back with me, telling them that our engineers could help with the repairs. The Lion had been quite badly

knocked around during the battle, and she could do with a little care and attention. Then again, so could we all.

The doors to the landing bay slid open, and to my complete joy and astonishment, Lily stormed through, with the children close behind her, all screaming my name. Lily threw herself at me, literally bowling me over and pinning me to the floor as she kissed me over and over again. Dasha, Faylinn and even little Naima clambered on top of the two of us, all yelling out, "Aboji, Aboji, you're home!"

Waves of love, joy and adoration swept over me, as I lay helpless on the floor, having never felt happier in my life. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red streaming across the flight deck, and launching itself at Ranger Fillion. Unlike me, Mal kept his feet as Angel landed in his arms, kissing him thoroughly as she wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him. Fillion didn't seem to be putting up much of a fight.

Lily's passionate kisses and touches brought my attention back to my family, and I found myself looking up into the most beautiful eyes in the universe. They were bright green and sparkled with joy as she gazed down at me, touching my face, my lips, my stubbly scalp, every part of me, as if she was trying to reassure herself that I was real.

I hugged my wife and children closely to me, then begged them to let me up. Eventually, we all scrambled to our feet, and started to make our way out of the landing bay, as I asked Lily, "How did you know I was due back? I was planning to surprise you."

Lily smiled up at me, her face filled with passion and happiness. "Matthew called us from the bridge. Angel and I spent the night with Demon, while all the children slept together." She gave a deep throaty chuckle as she went on, "Demon thinks we didn't notice her sneak out to spend the night with Matthew on the couch, but we did. She came back to bed when he went back to the bridge, and we all slept in late. Then Matthew called a few minutes ago while we were having a late breakfast."

Climbing onto the bullet car, I pulled Dasha and Faylinn up to sit on my knees, as Lily snuggled next to me, holding Naima in her arms. Holding my family as close to me as I could get them, I decided that Dorothy was right. There really was no place like home.

Lily went on, "Luke is still in Medbay, but he said he could join us later. If we take the children to the crèche, we can collect Luke, and then we can go home."

Her emerald eyes were filled with the promise of passion as she spoke, and I knew exactly what type of homecoming to expect. After the pressures and strains of the previous few days, I couldn't wait to fall into my own bed, and into my partners' arms.

There was nowhere else I could recover as quickly from the horrors of the interrogations I had taken part in during the previous twenty-four hours. Only Lily and Luke would ever hear what I had really been through and what I had done during that time. Only they could ease my mind, heart and soul of the pain I was carrying.

Hugging my family again, I gave thanks to whatever fates or deities had given them to me.

Angel

I looked down at Mal as he lay in my bed, and traced the dark circles under his eyes with my fingers.

"You look tired. Are you sure you don't want to sleep?"

My cowboy opened a lazy eye and grinned. "I can sleep when I get back to the Lion. But I can't do this when I'm alone."

He sat up abruptly and turned me onto my back, looking down at me as he ran his hands over my naked body. I could feel myself becoming aroused again, as I looked up into his amazing eyes. Then he frowned and moved his hand to my face, caressing my cheek softly. "You look a little tired yourself. What have you been up to while I've been gone?"

His question brought back memories of the previous day; memories I would have preferred not to dwell on.

The strength of the telepaths on the other ship had been almost overwhelming. There was no way Lily could have blocked them alone, and Demon could no longer draw on the power of the Vorlon to support us, so we'd been forced to find another source of power to help our sister. I still wasn't sure what I'd done, or where I'd found the strength, but somewhere deep inside me I'd tapped into an energy I hadn't known I possessed. The whole experience had frightened me, and I didn't want to think about it, so I pushed the memories to one side and smiled up at Mal.

"I haven't been up to much, but I'm hoping that you'll be up to something again, soon."

I reached down and stroked Mal's shaft, feeling it twitching to life under my touch. Then I grinned mischievously and whispered, "Coming for a ride, cowboy?"

Yet again, Mal gave me the ride of my life.

Gideon

I made my way down to the landing bay with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was looking forward to having my ship to myself again, without the pressure of having a General looking over my shoulder, second guessing every decision I made. On the other hand, Liz Lochley had been pretty good about not doing that. She'd spent enough time with her own commands to know how irritating that could be, and she'd really only stepped in to help when I'd needed her.

On the third hand, Liz and I had arrived at a new place in our long and complicated relationship. A good place, where we were each happy about the life the other had made for themselves. But on the fourth hand-if I went on like this I'd end up needing an octopus-I was glad to see her go, as it meant I didn't have to worry about her finding out about Deborah and her sisters' powers.

As I said, mixed feelings.

Marcus was leaving with Lochley, being carried by one of the White Stars back to Earth, to start rounding up suspects, and ensuring Earthforce was cleaned up. I'd reviewed the list of names Lochley was taking with her, and I'd been hugely relieved to find that no one I knew well was on that list. A few names had surprised me, as they were senior and well-respected people.

I'd called Lochley in her quarters, and she'd assured me that every named person would have the opportunity to clear themselves. She was very well aware of the risk that the telepaths could have maliciously added the names of some innocent people to their list. I was pretty sure the Minbari telepaths would have been able to detect a lie, but I was pleased to hear that Lochley shared my concerns. I knew she'd carry out the investigations fairly as well as thoroughly.

If I'd had any doubts on that score, the fact that Marcus Cole was accompanying Lochley would have reassured me. I may think Marcus can be the most irritating loud-mouth in the galaxy, but he's a fair-minded irritating loud-mouth, with a strong sense of justice, and a firm belief in the concept of 'innocent until proven guilty'. If Lochley got over-enthusiastic, Marcus would keep her on track.

For Marcus a return to Earth had the added bonus of reuniting him with his wife, who was posted there at that time.

I'd also asked Lochley what was going to happen to the human telepaths on board the mothership. I hadn't been entirely comfortable with her response that they and the ship would be taken to Minbar, where the telepaths would be tried in ISA courts for the crimes they had committed as Raiders. I'd have preferred for them to appear in human courts, but I'd been forced to agree that their crimes had been committed against ISA members, rather than just the Earth Alliance.

Deborah had joined me in the landing bay to say goodbye, although John, Lily and Angel were all absent. I had a pretty good idea what John and Lily were up to, especially as my Chief Medical Officer was also off-duty just then. I had an even better idea of how Angel was spending her time. The sight of the Lion making my flight deck look untidy while she was undergoing repairs made me grind my teeth again.

My empathic wife squeezed my arm and gave me a warning look, so I brought my annoyance under control, and turned to give Lochley my very snappiest salute, wishing her and Sandra all the luck in the world with their baby. Liz returned my salute in kind, thanked me for my wishes, exchanged a few quiet words with Deborah, then trotted up the ramp into the shuttle that was ready to take her to the waiting White Star.

Marcus Cole grinned at me and Deborah, then surprised us both by moving quickly, taking Deborah into his arms and hugging her fiercely. When he let her go, he saw our startled looks and laughed. "You shouldn't be so possessive, Captain. You have a very beautiful wife, who deserves to be hugged more often, and not just by you."

Deborah blushed and I laughed, slapping Marcus on the back. Maybe I overdid it a little, as he staggered forward as I hit him. Sometimes I don't know my own strength. Marcus was still coughing when he gasped out, "Isn't Angel coming down to say goodbye?"

My wife patted his arm and smiled a little sadly. "She's a bit tied up right now, Marcus." I didn't like the sound of that at all. Deborah can be very literal at times. She went on, "I know she'll be sorry she missed you, and I'll send her your love. In the meantime, this is from her."

Deborah kissed Marcus gently on the cheek and this time he blushed. I decided that all this hugging and kissing had gone quite far enough, particularly as none of it was coming my way, so I stepped forward and shook the Ranger's hand firmly. "Marcus, as usual, your company has been...interesting. Take care of yourself, take care of your wife, and don't get into any poker games if I'm not there to watch your back."

Marcus laughed while Deborah looked puzzled. She didn't know about the events of Marcus' bachelor party, and I very much wanted her to remain in blissful ignorance. I still can't look at a monkey without shuddering.

With a final wave, the Ranger boarded the shuttle, and I steered my wife out of the landing bay. We watched through the observation window as the shuttle lifted and departed, then walked back to the bullet car tube together, arm in arm. When we boarded the car, Deborah snuggled in next to me, then rested her head on my shoulder and sighed deeply.

I looked around, lifted her chin and kissed her gently. Brushing my fingers across her cheekbones, I said, "You still look tired. Why don't you go back to our quarters and take a nap? The crèche will take care of Marcus for a few hours."

Deborah looked up at me and smiled. "You look as if you could do with a little more sleep, too. How long before you can get away?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. With Christina in Medbay, and John still off-duty, I'll be stuck on the bridge for a while. We'll stay in this system until all the repairs are completed and the White Stars have taken the mothership back to Minbar. There's still a risk that another Shadow hybrid could show up, and the Excalibur's main gun seems to be the only thing guaranteed to take one of those bastards out. As long as there's a possibility that we could get dragged into another battle, I'm not willing to leave Sangeetha alone in command."

Deborah sighed but said nothing for a while. The bullet car was slowing when she finally asked, "And when will John get back to work?"

I grinned, kissed her again, and pulled her to her feet. "When Lily and Luke have finished with him."

Deborah snorted as I pushed her off the bullet car ahead of me, taking the opportunity to give her ever-inviting ass a quick pat.

"If I have to wait for that, I may never see you again!"

With one last affectionate squeeze and kiss, I pushed my wife away regretfully, telling her to go get some sleep, while I made my weary way back to the bridge.

Matheson

It was evening when I awoke with a guilty start. I should have been back on duty hours before. Why hadn't Matthew called me? As I looked down at my sleeping partners, the answer was obvious. My Captain had been giving me time for a reunion with my family. And what a reunion it had been!

The vibe shower had been a little cramped for the three of us, but we'd been creative, and found new positions and new ways to give each other pleasure, before falling into our big bed and making love for what seemed like hours. Long lazy hours during which Luke and I had arrived at the brink of orgasm again and again, each time deferring our release, while pleasuring our red-headed firecracker until she screamed and writhed, wave after wave of bliss washing over her, almost making her faint. When Luke and I had finally come, I thought we would never stop. Sleep followed quickly.

Now it was time to go back to work, as I had news for Matthew that I should have given him hours before. I slid out of bed and started creeping silently toward the bathroom when I heard a little moan and a yawn. I turned to see Lily sitting upright in bed, stretching like a cat, her hand held in front of her mouth, clenched into a tiny fist. I almost expected to see her claws sheathing and unsheathing as she stretched, with her fiery locks cascading around her shoulders and down her back, leaving her beautiful breasts bare.

Lily's claws may not have retracted but as she opened her incredible emerald eyes and looked at me, her nipples came erect, and she licked her lips, saying, "Come back to bed. I'm not done with you yet."

The look she gave me made my heart turn over and my cock twitch, but as always, my sense of duty overruled my desires, so I shook my head and said, "Later. I have to get to the bridge. There are some things I need to talk to Matthew about. I should have done it hours ago, but I was set upon by a ravenous red-head and a demanding doctor, and I got delayed."

I grinned at my completely unrepentant wife and ducked into the bathroom quickly, before she could overcome my resolve just by looking at me.

Having showered and dressed quickly, I returned to the bedroom to find that Lily had gone back to sleep, curled around Luke, who still hadn't stirred. It didn't surprise me, as I knew he'd been on duty for nearly thirty-six hours without a break before my return. I kissed each of them gently, then left my quarters and made my way to the bridge, wondering how Matthew would react to the news I carried.

Gideon

I could tell John had something important to tell me as soon as I saw him. Most people can't read John's expressions, as he keeps himself very much under control most of the time. Years of practice allowed me to see that right then he was worried.

When he'd arrived on the bridge I'd given a silent sigh of relief. I'd been struggling to stay awake, but I hadn't wanted to call him, possibly interrupting something he was doing. Hell, I hate to be interrupted at certain moments, so why shouldn't John?

John asked for a quiet word in the conference room before he took over from me, so I followed him silently, wondering what was bothering him. It didn't take long for him to tell me.

It turned out that he had helped with the interrogation of Talia Winters. I watched with concern as John started to tell me what he'd discovered, wondering just how much of a toll that interview had taken on my First Officer and friend. It can't have been a pleasant experience, but as always, John was stoical, and refused to discuss his own suffering. He just wanted to tell me what he'd found out.

"Talia was--is--a senior member of the rebel telepaths, and she acted as liaison between the remnants of Psi Corps, the Raiders and the Earthforce Black Ops units. She knew a lot, Captain, going right back to the days of the civil war. It wasn't easy getting the information out of her, but we succeeded in the end."

John's face was pale, and I asked quietly, "We? Or just you? Did they make you do that alone, John?" I was starting to get angry but John waved me down.

"No, not alone. I couldn't have done it alone." He paused for a moment, then asked what initially seemed to

be an irrelevant question. "Did you know that most Minbari telepaths are members of the religious order?" I shook my head, not knowing where he was going, but content to let him talk. It seemed John needed to get this off his chest. "Most but not all."

John paused again, looking down at his hands, clenched tightly into fists on the conference room table. "Some of them are Warriors."

That made me sit up and take notice. I'd never much liked the Minbari Warrior caste, as most of them were snotty, arrogant bastards. The idea of a Warrior telepath was truly terrifying.

John carried on quietly, "It took two of the Warrior teeps, and me, working together, to break Talia's blocks. She's only a P5, but somehow she found the strength to fight and fight, until we broke her. It was terrible, Matthew, terrible." Tears welled up in John's eyes as he continued to stare at his hands, and I reached out to grasp his arm, cursing silently, wishing I'd never allowed him to get dragged into this mission.

After a few seconds, John pulled himself together. "Once we broke through, everything she knew came cascading out. Most of it is only important to General Lochley and her investigation, but there was one piece of information that you should know about." My First Officer looked up at me seriously. "It's about the Cerberus and the ship that destroyed her."

My stomach turned and I wanted to vomit. If I'd realized that Talia knew anything about that incident, I'd have taken her captive myself and...I stopped, wondering exactly what I would have done. Where the subject of the Cerberus is concerned, I'm not entirely reasonable. Just what would I have been capable of doing to Talia to find out what she knew? To discover who was behind the deaths of my friends and crewmates. Perhaps it was best that I would never find out.

I'd stayed silent while thinking all this, but despite my poker face, I'm sure John had a pretty good idea of what was going through my mind. This time, it was he who reached out and grasped my arm. I swallowed a couple of times and asked hoarsely, "What did she know?"

John didn't hesitate. "She knew that the Shadows made three of those ships."

My mouth fell open and I didn't know whether to scream with delight or fury. "Three? THREE?" Was I happy that I'd managed to destroy two of them, or furious that one remained intact? Maybe the one that had murdered my friends. I leaped to my feet and started pacing, trying to get my conflicting emotions under control.

John went on quietly. "Three. One of them was made for the Drakh, and one for another race, a race that's only appeared in this part of the galaxy a couple of times. They're called the Streib, and like the Drakh, they were Shadow servants. The last one..."

John's voice trailed off, and I span on my heel, glaring at him, somehow knowing that I would hate what he was going to tell me. "The last one? Who did they make the last one for, John?"

The answer was everything I'd feared.

"They made it for Psi Corps. The Shadows had infiltrated and influenced Psi Corps for years. They built one of those ships to be used by telepaths."

I thought back on what I knew about the Shadow War, and how the Shadows had taken telepaths to be used as central processing units for their ships. This was a new variant. They had built a ship for Psi Corps to use for themselves. One question rang out in my mind, overwhelming every other consideration.

"Which one? Which one destroyed the Cerberus?"

John shook his head. "She didn't know. The one you destroyed today was the Psi Corps ship. The one we shot down over Stryvsteptixi could have been either the Drakh or the Streib vessel, there's no way to be sure. But there's only one of them left, Matt. Just one. We'll find it, and destroy it, and then it will be over. Then you can let it all go."

My First Officer's voice was filled with compassion as he whispered the last words. He knew of my obsession; he knew that I'd never be able to rest until I hunted down the killers of my crewmates.

I sat down abruptly, and dropped my head into my hands, thinking over what I'd just learned. What if it had been the Psi Corps ship that had shot at the Cerberus and destroyed my ship, leaving me to die alone in space? Had that atrocity been committed by humans, by telepaths trying out their new ship by killing a few hundred mere 'normals'? Somehow knowing that was a possibility was ten times worse than blaming aliens. I looked up at John, and I could see the sadness in his eyes. He hadn't read my mind. He hadn't needed to. He knew me well enough to know what I would be thinking. I reached out again and grasped his arm, squeezing it tightly.

"I'm going to believe it was the Drakh or the Streib. The Psi Corps ship had no reason to attack the Cerberus. It was one of the others, John. That's what I'm going to believe." I stood and straightened my uniform, then smiled down at my friend. "Thanks. It's good to know there's only one more of them out there. One day I'll find it. You have the bridge, Commander."

I left the conference room, and headed back to my quarters, telling myself over and over that it was enemy aliens who had killed my friends, not humans, not teeps, not the same kind of people as my best friend.

Demon

When Matthew returned to our quarters that evening he was distraught as well as exhausted. He tried to act normally, playing with Marcus for a while, eating dinner as usual, but both my son and I knew that something was seriously wrong.

*As I was getting him ready for bed, Marcus sent to me, *[/Did I do something bad? Is that why Daddy is hurting?/]**

I hugged my son fiercely, reassuring him that he wasn't to blame. "Daddy's had a lot of worries recently, Marcus. He was worried about Uncle John being away, and about the ship, and about Christina when she was hurt." Marcus and I had been to see Christina in Medbay earlier, where she was making a rapid recovery from her injuries. My son had always liked the Second Officer, probably because whenever she saw him, she always gave him a candy. I've no idea where she gets them from, but somehow Christina can always produce a treat for the children from about her person somewhere.

Marcus can be a mercenary little monster, like all children, but his affection for Christina was genuine, so he understood why his father might have been upset by her being hurt. With a smile of relief, he clambered into bed and snuggled down, with Half-Ted held tightly against his chest. He grinned up at me

and said, "I'm glad it's just me in bed tonight. Last night, Half-Ted had to sleep on the shelf. I don't trust Flynn with him." The glower that accompanied his last words made me laugh, and I tousled his curls affectionately, a gesture I knew he'd hate as he got older.

I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Goodnight, darling, sleep well."

As I stood, Marcus whispered, "Will Daddy come and kiss me goodnight?" He looked up at me with his huge golden brown eyes--the eyes that look so like his father's--and I melted inside.

"Of course he will. Now snuggle down and he'll be in shortly."

I left the bedroom and walked into the room we used as an office. Matthew was sitting at his desk, and I listened as he quietly dictated letters to the families of the crew we had lost. My husband's face was calm and impassive, but I could feel his pain from where I stood. As he finished the last letter, I moved over to his chair, standing behind him and massaging his neck and shoulders.

Matthew closed his eyes and moaned softly with pleasure as I kneaded my fingers into his tense muscles. After a few moments, I kissed the top of his head, and said quietly, "Marcus would like a goodnight kiss."

Matthew took my hand from his shoulder and gently lifted it to his mouth. Then turning in his chair to face me, he looked up and smiled sadly. "He's not the only one."

I kissed him gently on the lips, then watched as he wearily pushed himself to his feet and walked through into our son's bedroom. I could feel his exhaustion, his anger and frustration, his sadness, but most of all, his determination, even with my weakened powers.

I knew there was little I could do to help him through all those feelings except to be there for him, to listen when he wanted to talk, and to be patient when he didn't. I find it difficult sometimes to keep my mouth shut and not interfere, but no one said being the Captain's wife was easy. But there are definitely compensations; the benefits almost always outweigh the costs.

I received one of those benefits a few moments later, when my gorgeous husband held out his arms to me as he left our son's room, and said, "Let's go to bed."

We made love, then I sat astride Matthew's hips and massaged his neck and back again, as he lay face down on the bed and we talked. Matthew told me what John had discovered and I worked the tension out of his shoulders and neck while he worked his way through his conflicting emotions. I did my best to send out waves of love and tranquility to help soothe him as he talked, and eventually he calmed. I finally stretched out on the bed next to him and reached to take him into my arms, stroking his thick, soft hair, as we drifted into sleep.

I was only half-awake when I heard Matthew's whispered words.

"This wasn't the last battle, Deborah, but I swear the next one will be."

I could only hope that would be the case, and I swore to myself that whenever it happened, I would be at my husband's side to help him in any way I could.

3rd March 2273

Angel

Mal and I limped down to the landing bay, arm in arm. Before we'd left my quarters we'd both agreed that it was fortunate his ship was repaired and ready to leave then. If he'd stayed any longer, neither of us would have been able to walk straight for a month.

The memories of those twenty-four hours with Mal are ones I will always treasure. We had such great fun together, enjoying everything about each other, physically and mentally. We laughed, we lusted, we ate and drank, we watched old movies and cried together then we fucked like bunnies on aphrodisiacs and started all over again. The only things we didn't do were to fight or to fall in love, and for that I was truly grateful.

Don't get me wrong; Mal is a wonderful man, and I'm very fond of him. He's sexy, funny, smart and one hell of a lover, but a Ranger's life is full of adventure and wandering, and that's not what I'm looking for in a man. Not unless I can go wandering with him.

So our parting was truly 'such sweet sorrow'. Sadness and contentment combined to make me feel happy and emotional at the same time, but mainly thankful, and with no regrets.

I had just kissed Mal goodbye for the final time, and I was walking--limping--with him to the Lion's boarding ramp when Matthew arrived. I swear Demon has been giving him lessons in keeping his face poker straight--not that he needed them--as he showed no emotion at all when his eyes flicked to where Mal and my hands were still joined. The only clue to his reaction was a slight narrowing of his eyes, which made me think he was lucky that Demon wasn't standing next to him, reading his emotions.

My Captain forced a smile to his face, and said to Mal, "Ranger Fillion. I heard your ship was all fixed up and ready to go. I thought I'd just come down and make sure your departure went a little more smoothly than last time."

Mal's smile was just as forced as he replied, "Very considerate of you, I'm sure, Captain. We won't need to make your landing bay untidy for much longer now. I'm just going to say goodbye to Angel, and then we'll be on our way."

That was a little surprising, as we'd already said our goodbyes, but I didn't exactly struggle when Mal grabbed me, held me tightly and kissed me thoroughly. Matt said nothing, but I could almost feel his eyes boring holes into my back. If looks could have killed, Mal would have dropped dead on the spot, and I would have been mortally wounded.

When my cowboy finally released me--I was just about to expire from lack of breath. That Ranger has one hell of a pair of lungs on him--he saluted Gideon casually, and turned to start up the ramp.

Matt said nothing until Mal arrived at the top then he called out. "I guess I really ought to thank you for calling Delenn before you left Babylon 5. She arrived in the nick of time."

Mal shrugged his shoulders, and said, "That's OK, Captain. Think nothing of it."

Gideon moved to my side and rested one hand on my shoulder. I looked up at him in surprise, and caught the roguish grin on his face as he replied. "OK, I won't. Come along, Ms. Denier. I'm sure you're due back on duty around now."

Of course, the bastard was right, and he knew it, so I waved one last time at Mal, and let Gideon steer me out of the landing bay, still with his hand on my shoulder. We paused outside, watching through the observation window as the flight deck was depressurized, and the Lion edged her way out.

Matt squeezed my shoulder gently, saying, "Sorry to have to break you and Ranger Fillion apart, Angel. It would never have worked out, you know."

I didn't have to possess my sister's empathic powers to know just how insincere those words were. I turned to face Matt and smiled, brushing his hand off my shoulder with my telekinesis. That should have been a warning to him, but Matt never does know when to quit with me.

"Captain, that was rather rude. You really should have thanked Ranger Fillion properly."

Matt looked at me quizzically. I smiled sweetly at him, grabbing his balls with my mind and giving him a firm squeeze, which turned his expression from quizzical to startled in a split second. The application of a little more pressure made Matt swallow and lift himself onto his toes, trying to escape my mental grasp.

"Uh, Angel..." His voice was a little more high-pitched than usual, as I maintained the pressure.

"Yes, Captain? Oh well, I suppose it doesn't matter, as I thanked Ranger Fillion very thoroughly on your behalf." That made Matt wince a little more, but I didn't let up the pressure as I went on, "Anyway, he really should have thanked you, too, so I suppose you're even."

By now Matt's voice was nearly a squeak "What did he have to thank me for?"

I'd made sure there was no one around before I'd grabbed Gideon, but he would have looked very odd to any passer-by, standing on tiptoes and going a little red in the face. I gave him one last squeeze before releasing him and watching him drop back onto the soles of his feet with a sigh of relief.

"Why for loaning us the use of Demon's bike, of course. You know how much I enjoy a good, hard ride."

Mal and I hadn't used the bike on this visit, but Matt didn't need to know that. With one last wink, I turned my back and walked away, swaying my hips seductively. God knows how I did it, given how sore I was inside, but a girl has her pride.

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

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four R

{[Part 1: These Sheltering Arms](#)} {[Part 2: The Last Battle](#)}