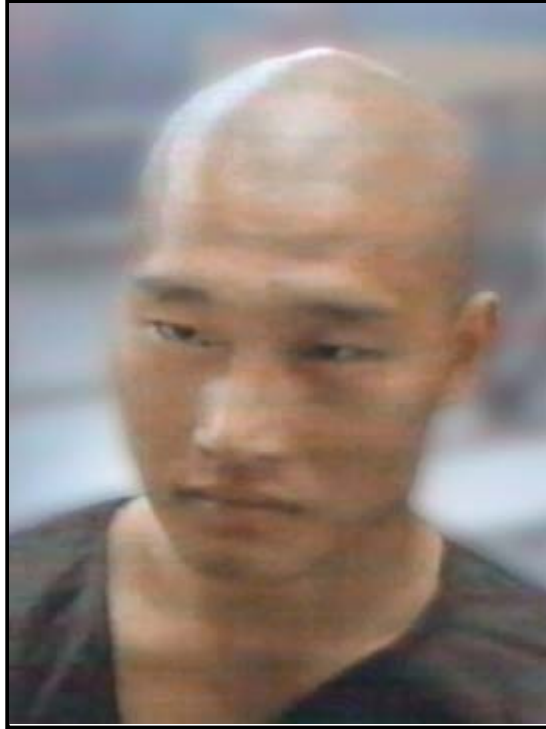


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four R - Part 2: The Last Battle

by *The Space Witches*



John has to go undercover.

Chapter 1

24th February 2273

Demon

*I stood just inside the doorway to Angel's bedroom with my hands on my hips, tapping my foot rapidly on the floor. I suspect I was projecting impatience so strongly that the whole ship could feel it, even with my diminished powers. Of course, the only people *not* affected by my projections were my sisters, so Angel took absolutely no notice of me, as she continued to burrow into the pile of clothes at the bottom of her closet.*

All I could see of her at that moment was her black leather clad butt, and the reason I was tapping my foot was to stop myself giving my sister a swift kick in that tempting target.

"Well, when did you last see it?" I hissed through gritted teeth.

Angel's head emerged from the closet and she glared at me over her shoulder as she said, "If I knew that, I'd know where it is, wouldn't I?" I think her teeth were even more gritted than mine. At this rate one of us was going to crack enamel and need a dentist.

"It's nine months since we last visited B5. Have you used it since then? What were you wearing when you last went shopping on the station?" I was trying to be practical, but I knew the tone of my voice wasn't helping matters.

The problem was that I knew my husband was waiting for us in the landing bay, and I knew he'd be getting increasingly impatient with the delay. He had an appointment over on B5, and Matthew hates being late nearly as much as I do. And because he knows that I'm as obsessive as he is about being prompt, when Angel and I turned up late, he'd know who was responsible. That meant he'd yell at Angel, and she'd yell back, and before we knew it we'd have one of the infamous Matthew vs. Angel fights on our hands. Not pretty.

Angel bounced to her feet and stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at me. If we hadn't been so dissimilar in looks, we could have been bookends. We may be half-sisters, but we have little in common, either physically or temperamentally. Matthew says he can see our kinship in our bone structure, but I'm not convinced. Angel and I both look like our mothers, although God knows I'd hate to think I took after the woman who gave birth to me in any other way.

Angel's eyes flashed with blue fire as she hissed, "How do you expect me to remember what I was wearing... Oh."

My raven haired sister span on her heel and dived back into the closet, dragging out a pretty blue top she rarely wore from the bottom of a pile of red and black clothes. The loose cotton top had two tiny pockets stitched on the front and Angel slid her fingers into each pocket in turn. She looked up and gave me a huge smile as she waved her credit chip in the air.

"Got it! I haven't worn this since then, and I forgot..."

Before she could go on I lunged forward, grabbed her wrist and started to drag her out of her quarters. "I don't care! Just shift your leather-clad butt down to the landing bay as fast as you can move it!"

We ran down the corridor toward the bullet car tube as fast as we could. I have longer legs than Angel, so I arrived a couple of seconds ahead of her, slamming my hand into the call button, then hopping from foot to foot with impatience, waiting for the bullet car to arrive. I was whispering a silent prayer that something might have delayed Matthew on the bridge. He wouldn't be happy at being held up by Angel and me when he knew that our only reason for visiting B5 was to go shopping. Hence the need to find Angel's credit chip.

I'd told her that she could use mine and pay me back later, but she'd gotten stubborn, insisting that she could pay her own way, as soon as she'd found her chip. Why she hadn't looked for it before I'd arrived at her quarters to collect her is beyond me completely, but then so are most things Angel thinks, feels and does. My younger sister is a mystery to me.

The bullet car arrived and we tumbled inside. I called out our destination and collapsed back onto the hard seat, breathing a sigh of relief. A quick glance at the chronometer on the wall reassured me that we weren't horribly late. I relaxed and closed my eyes, knowing that the journey would take only five minutes or so. I could only hope that the delay wouldn't be sufficient to make us miss our docking slot at B5. If we did, Matthew would be really mad and the fireworks would start.

Angel was all smiles and cheerfulness again, now she'd found her chip, and she tugged at my sleeve as I sat with my eyes closed, asking, "Is there anything you particularly want to get on B5? More black

clothes, perhaps?"

*I opened my eyes and smiled at her. Only my sisters knew why I always wore black. It's not a big secret, but no one else has ever asked. It's very simple really. I'm a dirt magnet. If there's any dirt around, it will end up smudged all over me. Since I became a mother it has gotten worse, so the only solution is to wear clothes that don't show the dirt. Of course, the other reason is that I'm really, *really* bad at deciding what colors match with each other. By sticking to just one color, I never have to make that decision.*

"It's Marcus' birthday in a couple of months, and I doubt we'll get anywhere else I can buy his presents between now and then, so I'm afraid most of my shopping will be for toys. But I'm sure I can find the time to visit some other shops, too. Matthew said he didn't know how long his meeting would last. It could go on for quite a while."

Angel frowned and asked, "Do you know what Ben Marriot wants to see Matt and John about?"

I shook my head. "Matthew just said they'd received orders from President Sheridan to go to B5, and Ben would explain the rest. I don't think Matthew knows any more than that himself."

My husband hadn't been particularly amused when he'd received his orders from the President. Matthew hates not knowing what's going on. He's nosy by nature, although he says it's curiosity. That's just a polite word for nosy, of course. I was never very good at being polite. I've never wasted my energy on being something I simply can't be.

Angel sniffed. "I bet Matt loves that. I guess that means he's in a bad mood, and he'll probably yell at me for being late."

I sighed. "Probably. Just for once, could you say 'sorry' and let it go? Please? Pretty please?" I gave my sister a pleading smile and she giggled in response.

The bullet car started to slow as we reached our destination, and Angel stood, grinning down at me. "Just this once, and only because you asked so nicely, I'll let the Captain yell at me without yelling back."

I grinned up at her. "Thanks." Then I took a deep breath and restored the façade I usually presented to the world. As an empath, I can feel what others are feeling, and I can project my own feelings. Not as powerfully as I once could, as for reasons I don't want to dwell on, the source of my power has diminished. Nevertheless, I always have to be alert to the possibility that I could accidentally project a feeling, and I hold myself under rigid control at all times to prevent that possibility. I only relax that control around my family, who I know I can trust. For the rest of the world I wear a blank mask, freezing my face into immobility, to prevent any feelings from showing.

With my camouflage back in place, I stood and stepped out of the bullet car, ready to face the world.

Angel

I sat in my shuttle seat, pretending to be the epitome of contrition, but I suspected Matt wasn't buying it for a second. He hadn't actually yelled at me when Demon and I had arrived in the landing bay, where he'd waited with John and Lily, but he'd given me a look that should have dropped me in my tracks. If he'd looked like that at any other member of his crew, they'd have fainted dead away. I'm a little more resilient. I've had plenty of practice with handling those looks over the years.

Of course, Matt knew exactly whose fault it was that Demon and I were late, and he hadn't said a word to my darling sister, just leaning across to give her a quick kiss on the cheek, putting his arm around her waist and pushing her gently up the shuttle ramp. He then waved an imperious hand at me and pointed to a seat at the back. I'm surprised he didn't bark, "Sit!" and expect me to come to heel. I came damned close to giving him a 'woof' in response, but I remembered my promise to Demon, and bit my lip.

So I said "woof" mentally instead of saying it out loud. Demon knew what I was doing, and I knew that mentally she was rolling her eyes at me, while physically she kept her mask on. That was a good thing, as whenever my sister rolls her eyes, everyone thinks she's about to get sick.

Once our beloved Captain was settled into the co-pilot's seat, I glared at the back of his head and stuck my tongue out at him, which earned me a stern look from my big sister. I pouted for a while, then decided that I wouldn't let Matt's ill-temper spoil my day, so I turned to Lily and asked her the same question I'd asked Demon earlier.

"Is there anything you particularly want to get on B5?" We had a sisters' shopping trip planned, and I was looking forward to restocking my wardrobe. I hadn't had any new clothes for months. I do love shopping for pretty new things. Especially pretty red things, preferably with lace and silk involved somewhere along the line.

Lily gave a throaty chuckle and batted her eyelashes at John, who sat opposite her. "I need some new lingerie. For some reason all my underwear keeps getting torn."

John blushed a little, and studiously ignored us both, watching out of the front window as we approached B5. It grew and grew as we got nearer and I shuddered a little as the shuttle entered the docking bay, feeling as if we were being swallowed alive.

To cheer myself, I teased John. "What can I say? They just don't make good underwear like they used to," I said cheerfully, which earned another nuclear blush from John Matheson. I can see why Lily loves him so much, as in spite of being involved with Lily and Luke for all these years, John still embarrasses easily.

*Lily's comment had made me feel a little sad, as it had been far too long since anyone had torn *my* underwear off me. B5 also brought back difficult memories for me. This is where I'd lived with Lucas, when I'd had my panties ripped off quite regularly, and it was hard not to romanticize that period of my life. I'd been happy much of the time with Lucas, mainly because of the panty ripping sex we had frequently, but I'd also been desperately sad and lonely, missing my sisters dreadfully. So, yes, I guess I was growing up, as I remember a time when panty ripping sex would have been enough for me. I know so little about Lucas then; understood so little about what drove him and made him behave in the way he did. I wondered if I'd understood more about him whether things would have worked out differently. Probably not.*

Pushing those thoughts aside, I remembered my last trip to B5 and the new friend I'd made then. It was too much to hope that Marcus Cole would be visiting B5 while we were there, but I could dream. But, let me assure you; there was no panty-ripping sex involved in my dreams of Marcus Cole, as this rather stern looking woman kept glaring at me whenever my thoughts headed in that direction.

Demon must have caught the far-away look in my eyes, as she relaxed enough to smile at me and ask softly, "And what are you looking for on B5, Angel?"

There was a lot of meaning in her voice and in the look she gave me, and I decided that I didn't want to be maudlin and feel sorry for myself. I wanted to have some enjoyment. So I smiled back as I winked and said, "Fun. Lots and lots of fun."

Matt's groan could be heard right around the shuttle, so I stuck my tongue out at the back of his head again, then started unfastening my safety harness as we docked.

Gideon

Standing in the arrivals area of B5, I was well aware of Zack Allen and Angel waiting impatiently at the exit as John and I said goodbye to our wives. It doesn't matter how short a period of separation is in prospect, goodbyes should always be done properly, which means some very thorough and pleasurable kissing, accompanied by a nice line in ass groping. That works both ways of course. I could feel Deborah's hands resting on my buttocks, just as I gave her butt a quick squeeze.

We broke for breath and I grinned at her, asking, "If Lily's shopping for lingerie, will you be getting something new, too? Something black and lacy, perhaps?" I gave Deborah my best puppy dog pleading look: the one she can never resist. I have to admit that I don't pay a great deal of attention to my wife's clothes. She looks gorgeous in whatever she wears, but even better in nothing at all, except maybe the odd wisp of black lace and silk. And I love it that no one else knows just how good she looks like that. Selfish bastard, ain't I?

Deborah chuckled softly. "If they have anything in my size."

I laughed. My wife is tall and slim, with curves in all the right places. The only size problem she ever has is with shoes. She has big feet. Pretty feet, but long and slender, which makes finding shoes a problem. I looked down past her tight black sweater and knee-length black leather skirt, and saw she was wearing a pair of flat-heeled suede boots that had seen better days.

"You'd better look for shoes while you're here. Can't have the Captain's wife walking around barefoot." I pulled her close and gave her another quick kiss before releasing her, taking her hand and pulling her toward the exit.

*Deborah wrinkled her nose and sighed. "I know. I *hate* shopping for shoes, especially with Lily and Angel. Lily has as much of a problem as I do, except she can't find shoes small enough, and we both get annoyed with Angel, who finds beautiful shoes that fit her in every shop we visit."*

We arrived at the exit, closely followed by John and Lily. Zack Allen looked pointedly at the clock on the wall of the arrivals lounge, and I saw that we were running a little late.

With one last quick kiss, I told Deborah, "If I haven't contacted you by the time you're ready to leave, just call Trace and he'll come over and get you. Don't bankrupt us on toys for Marcus, although spend as much as you want on things for yourself that you know I'll like: lacy lingerie for example."

Deborah slapped my arm as I winked at her, so I gave her a light smack on the butt and left with John and Zack, whistling softly to myself.

Matheson

As we walked down the corridors of B5, headed for the Captain's office, I could see that Matthew was in a good mood. All his impatient irritation at the delay while we had waited for Demon and Angel had dissipated, much to my relief. I had no idea what we were expected to do on B5, but I had no doubt that having a cranky Matthew Gideon around wouldn't have helped.

To be fair, Matthew's mood was a lot more cheerful these days. There had been a time during the previous year when he and Demon had been at odds, and it had been rough for everyone on board the Excalibur. Matthew didn't suffer fools gladly at any time, but around then he hadn't suffered them at all. My poor husband, Luke, had paid dearly for a mistake he'd made on a requisition for medical supplies. He'd required a long recovery time, and a lot of comfort and coddling from Lily and me, to get over being sentenced to five hours of Narn opera.

Thinking of Luke made me wonder how he would get on with babysitting Marcus Gideon along with our own three children. Although Marcus and Dasha loved to spend time together, putting the junior Gideon in the same room as our older daughter, Faylinn, was a recipe for fireworks. They had much the same effect on each other as Gideon Senior and Angel. I could only hope that Marcus had the good sense to leave Half-Ted at home. The poor bear had suffered enough from Faylinn's temper. At least we now kept a Teddy Bear Repair Kit on board.

As we arrived at the Captain's office, I was delighted to see Ben Marriot striding across the room to greet us. He looked ten years younger than when we'd last seen him, his face no longer etched with lines of the pain he'd once suffered. Ben had been the unknowing recipient of the witches' magic, which had fixed the damage to his spine, allowing him to walk again, and releasing him from the agony he'd suffered for years.

Captain Marriot's gratitude for his cure was evident in his words to me. Having given Matthew a fast hug, he turned to me and nodded in a friendly way, careful not to hold out his hand. He knew that as a telepath I avoided casual physical contact. He smiled and asked after Luke. "I hope we'll get time for another little get together during your visit, Commander Matheson, as I'd like to show Dr. Raven what a miracle he performed. Dr. Hobbes tells me there's no sign that my spine was ever injured. She's always nagging at me to tell her exactly what was done to fix the damage, but I've kept my promise. All she knows is that your partner, Luke, is a miracle worker."

I smiled and thanked him, careful not to look at Matthew. Captain Marriot thought that his injury had been cured by Luke's innovative use of regenerator technology, while in fact the sisters had healed him, using their magic, and some of their own life-force.

Ben gave me a delighted clap on the shoulder, which nearly sent me staggering across the room, then waved us to the sofas by the window of his office. He and Zack sat on one sofa, while Matthew and I settled opposite them on the other side of a coffee table. I didn't have to be a telepath to know what my Captain's first question was going to be.

"So what are we here for, Ben? And why all the mystery?"

Ben opened his mouth to respond, but before he could do so, a voice came from the doorway.

"Perhaps I should answer that question, Matt."

I swung around to look and my mouth fell open in surprise. Hurriedly composing myself, I quickly looked around at my Captain, to see how he would respond. Matthew's face was a complete blank. He must have been taking lessons from Demon.

Gideon

I stood slowly, and walked toward the door, stopping just short of the person standing there. I straightened my back and snapped out a crisp salute. Yeah, I can do that when I want to, and this was a time when I wanted to make it absolutely, unequivocally clear that as far as I was concerned, this meeting was strictly business.

"General Lochley. Good to see you again," I lied, while thinking, [Good God, why did she have to get promoted before me?]

Liz Lochley snapped back a salute that put mine to shame, then she said quietly, "At ease, Captain."

I looked into her eyes, and I could see that she was no happier about this public reunion than I was. We hadn't seen each other in over three years, and while we had parted on amicable terms, we would both have been delighted if our paths had never crossed again. I'd heard from President Sheridan that Liz was married and settled on Earth, having been promoted to the rank of General, and that she was now working in Earthforce Security. So what was she doing out in space? And what did she want with me and the Excalibur?

Liz--I stopped myself, reminding myself that I shouldn't even think of her by that name. General Liz...I mean General Lochley waved me back toward the sofas, where I could see John and Ben had risen to their feet to salute the General. John looked at me anxiously, while Zack Allen glared at both Lochley and me from where he'd remained, stubbornly seated on the sofa. As he wasn't part of Earthforce, he didn't need to salute, but remaining seated seemed unnecessarily impolite. I still didn't know exactly what I'd done to annoy the B5 Chief of Security, but he'd made it clear that he didn't think much of me on every visit we'd made to B5 in recent years. It seemed that Lochley was equally out of Zack's favor.

The General waved us all back to the sofas, so I sat next to John again, while Lochley moved to stand in front of the window, leaning back against the large pane, with her arms crossed in front of her. She paused for a moment, her head down, then she looked over at Ben and asked, "Is the room secure, Captain?"

Ben nodded. "As you instructed, General. Mr. Allen and I went over it just before you arrived. No one outside this room can hear what's said in here. Zack's people are outside, making sure no one gets near this office who shouldn't."

This exchange gave me a chance to really look at Lochley. She hadn't changed much since we'd first met nearly six years before. She was still tall and slim, very toned, with generous breasts, slim hips and long legs. The planes of her face seemed to have hardened a little, but that might have been because she wore her hair scraped back severely in a tight braid, which didn't flatter her. What struck me most was how worried she looked, and that worried me.

When I had known her, Liz Lochley had shouldered the burden of running B5 and protecting the lives of half a million people, without appearing unduly strained or stressed by her responsibilities. She was a perfectionist, who took her duties seriously, but she'd always been calm and unflappable. If Liz--General

Lochley-looked worried, then something was seriously wrong.

It was obvious from Zack and Ben's reaction that they'd expected Lochley, so why had they said nothing? The secrecy, combined with my old flame's evident anxiety, was enough to set some serious alarm bells ringing. Something was wrong and whatever it was, it was serious.

Lochley lifted her head and sighed, then began speaking quietly. "Last year, the Excalibur destroyed a new Raiders' ship: a big one." She looked at me, and I nodded but kept silent, wondering where this was going. I had a nasty feeling I knew, but I wanted it spelled out.

"From the records made by the Excalibur at the time, it was apparent that the Raiders' ship was an old Earthforce destroyer, which had been..." Lochley paused, chewing her lip. It looked to me as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. Choosing her word carefully, she said, "Adapted."

I barked out a laugh of derision. "That's a good word. Let's not beat about the bush here, General. We all know how that ship was altered and by who." At least I assumed we all knew. I glanced over at Zack and Ben, and their expressions were clear. They knew.

I stood quickly and started to pace. "It was Shadow tech. Changed by the Shadows for Earthforce and President Clark. And they were all supposed to have been destroyed during the civil war. So where has that ship been hiding for the last twelve years, and are there any more of them out there?" I came to an abrupt halt on the far side of the coffee table from Lochley, and glared at her.

It felt as if the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees. Ben's face showed his surprise at my outburst. John and Zack just looked curious. They hadn't been directly involved in the fighting that had followed Sheridan's declaration of independence from Earth, but Lochley, Ben and I had.

Back in 2261, I had served on the Agamemnon, Sheridan's old ship, and one of the first to declare for the rebels. We had fought in Sheridan's fleet and under his command we had led the advance to liberate Earth. Ben had served on the Heracles, which had fought for Clark, but like most of the Heracles crew, Ben had been on the side of the rebels and he'd been crippled trying to relieve his Captain of duty in the fight for Proxima 3. Lochley had served on the Apollo, the flagship of the Earthforce fleet, which had stayed loyal to Clark right up to the moment when he'd turned the defense platforms on Earth, knowing that he had lost, and wanting to take the whole planet with him when he killed himself.

Sheridan had commanded the Agamemnon to ram the last platform, knowing it was the only way he could save Earth, but also knowing that he was condemning every man and woman under his command to death. That included me, although Sheridan didn't know it; he didn't know me from Adam in those days. In those few moments, every one of us on board the Agamemnon had expected to die. But then the Apollo appeared from hyperspace, and blew the defense platform out of our path, saving us all.

The Apollo came through in the end, but there had always been tensions between officers who had served on opposing sides of that conflict. Mostly we avoided talking about it, so mentioning the Shadow tech adapted destroyers around an officer who had stayed loyal to Clark, as Lochley had, wasn't exactly tactful. Well, I never claimed to be a diplomat.

Shadow tech always made me mad, anyway. It was a Shadow tech ship that had attacked and destroyed the Cerberus fourteen years before, killing my friends and crewmates. I still carried a grudge about that event, and I'd vowed to take revenge on behalf of my colleagues. Back in '71, I'd destroyed a ship that looked like the one that had attacked the Cerberus, but I had no idea how many more of them there were

out there. One day I planned to track them all down and destroy every last one of the bastards. One day.

Lochley avoided my question, saying, "We thought Captain Ivanova had destroyed all of the Shadow tech destroyers during her advance on Earth with the White Star fleet. As you say, Captain, it would appear that we were wrong. So now we're trying to find out whether there are any more of those ships left intact, and if so, we want to find them and destroy them."

I had started to pace again while she spoke, and now halted abruptly in front of Lochley. "That's gonna be easier said than done." Such a cliché. Max would be ashamed of me.

The General nodded again. "You're right. It would have helped if the Excalibur had been able to back-track the Raiders' emissions and find their base, but that didn't happen." For a moment, I thought the look she gave me was accusing, but then Liz's face softened a little, and she almost smiled. "I know that if any ship could have found them, Matt, it would have been the Excalibur, but the Raiders' ship was just too good at hiding its trail."

I nodded in agreement. We'd used every trick we knew to track back on the trail of the Shadow-tech destroyer. My Chief Sensor Operator, Ankaren, had used all his skills and knowledge, and all the advanced equipment the Excalibur possessed, but even he hadn't been able to follow the traces through hyperspace. They had faded into nothing before we got anywhere near a point where a base could have been hidden. We'd been forced to abandon our search and return to our previous mission.

Lochley resumed. "In the absence of that evidence, we took a different track."

I found her use of the word 'we' interesting. Who exactly was she referring to? Earthforce Security? The Rangers? The ISA? I made a mental note to ask Lochley later and waited for her to go on.

"Using agents provided by the Rangers, we worked back through the Raider contacts. It was slow and dangerous work, but we eventually found the evidence we needed. Evidence we'd much rather not have found." Lochley sighed deeply, then straightened her back and looked me straight in the eyes as I faced her across the table. "We now know that supplies, funds and support for the Raiders have come from within Earthforce."

Matheson

I looked from Matthew to General Lochley and back again, wondering just how well these two were going to work together, given their history. I was desperately blocking their thoughts, but their emotions were another matter. Even a 'normal' could sense the atmosphere between them, as the look of discomfort on Ben Marriot's face made clear. As a telepath, I couldn't help feeling every nuance of guilt, embarrassment, regret and-somewhat surprisingly-affection that the two ex-lovers shared. I was glad Demon wasn't in the room. She would have found it incredibly difficult to control her reaction to those emotions, even now her empathic powers were diminished.

What was even more surprising to me was Matthew's lack of reaction to Lochley's statement. He just nodded and said quietly, his voice filled with regret. "I suspected as much."

Lochley looked at him quizzically, and Matthew took a deep breath, running his hand through his hair, then he looked at the General almost defiantly and said, "I've known there's been something rotten deep within Earthforce for some time, and so has Ben." Looking across at Marriot I could see that he was

nodding.

Matthew went on, "There have always been rumors about 'Black Ops' divisions, but it was only when I came across Robert Black and his people on Theta 49 that my suspicions were confirmed. The orders I was given by General Thompson reeked of a cover-up. After that, I did a little quiet digging around, with Ben's help, and we found out quite a bit. There's a cadre of officers within Earthforce who still support the principles Clark stood for. They also have links to Humanity First, believing that humans are superior to all other species, and that we should rule the galaxy. They despise the ISA and everything it stands for."

My Captain looked apologetically in my direction as he smiled sadly and said, "They also despise telepaths, who they call 'freaks'. You can imagine how popular that makes me with these guys. I was given command of the ISA flagship, with a multi-species crew and a telepathic XO. They think I should be taken out and shot as a traitor to mankind." Matthew gave a twisted smile as he nodded toward his old friend, Ben Marriot. "And before Ben got the use of his legs back, they thought he should be shot, too, for being a cripple—a less than perfect human—who was willing to work with aliens on B5. These are not nice people, General. I know one or two names, but that's all. I suspect there are far more of them than Ben and I could find."

Lochley didn't look at all surprised by what Matthew had said, while I was rigid with shock and outrage. How long had Matthew known about this group? Why had he never confided in me about them? The answer was obvious, of course. He'd wanted to protect me from the harsh realities of Earthforce. He hadn't wanted me to know that there were prejudiced people in Earthforce, just as there were everywhere. I wanted to hug Matthew and hit him at the same time. Did he really think I didn't know that Earthforce was riddled with people who hated me, just for being what I was? Just how long did Matthew think he could go on protecting me from them? I could only admire my friend for trying, but I decided we needed to talk about the issue sometime. I had to make him appreciate that I could deal with the hatred of the prejudiced. I'd been dealing with it all my life as a telepath.

Lochley nodded. "I guessed you might have your suspicions, which is one of the reasons I wanted you on this mission. You and Captain Marriot are among the few officers in Earthforce who I know I can trust. The Humanity First crowd hates you both, so it's likely the Black Ops group do, too."

I'd remained silent since Lochley had arrived, but now I had to speak. "And me, General? Do you trust me? As an officer and as a telepath?"

*I had no idea how Lochley felt about telepaths, although I *did* know she had resisted the idea of allowing a colony of telepaths to make their home on B5 back in '62. President Sheridan had over-ruled her and allowed the telepaths to stay, with disastrous consequences. On that occasion, Lochley had probably been right, but I had no idea what her motivations had been.*

The General gave me a warm smile, and I knew she was speaking the truth when she said, "You wouldn't be in this room if I didn't trust you. My apologies, Commander Matheson, I should have added your name to that short list of officers I trust. We may not know each other well, but your record speaks for itself, and your friendship with Matt says even more about you."

I nodded my appreciation for her words, but before I could say more, Matthew interrupted, "This is all very well, but what are we here for? What's made you decide to bring us together now? What's going on, Liz?"

I hurriedly blocked the wave of irritation that came from Lochley at Matthew's use of the shortened

version of her first name. What I couldn't block was her mental scream, *[/That's General Elizabeth Lochley to you, buster, and don't you forget it!/]* She managed to keep her emotions under control, but the look she gave Matthew should have turned him to stone.

Matthew gave a diffident shrug, obviously knowing he'd crossed a line, but giving the appearance of not caring, as he waited for Lochley's response. Her voice was quiet, controlled and icy cold as she said, "We have a list of suspects, but we need more evidence before we can act. One of the leaders of Humanity First is due to arrive on B5 tomorrow. He's not known publicly as an organizer of the group, in fact our informant tells us that he maintains a cover as a rather ordinary civil servant. He's going to introduce our undercover agent to a representative from the Raiders.

"We don't know who this person is, but we have suspicions, based on information provided by our agent, that the Raider representative may well be a telepath. That may seem unlikely given the attitude the HF people have toward telepaths, but it seems in this case they're willing to overcome their natural prejudices to achieve their ultimate goal of taking Earth out of the ISA. Humanity First and the Raiders may have different agendas, but it appears they're prepared to work together, in an unholy alliance against us. There are also possible links with the old Psi Corps that remain unsubstantiated, but which are nevertheless suggestive."

I groaned softly to myself. Would the specter of Psi Corps never vanish from my life? They may have been disbanded and replaced by the Bureau of Telepath Integration, but some leopards never change their spots. The same people remained in control, the same P11's and P12's who had been Psi Cops in the old Corp were now the interrogators--the Joneses--in the Bureau. 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.' Everything changes, but remains the same.

Matthew obviously saw and understood my discomfort, as he intervened, drawing Lochley's attention away from me. "So who is this undercover agent who's going to meet with the Raider rep?"

I had my suspicions, and I'm sure Matthew had, too.

Lochley smiled. "Someone I know you've already met, Captain. He should be here by now. Another of the Rangers was going to bring him..." She broke off and looked toward the door, her smile becoming warmer. "Here they are."

I looked from the doorway back to Matthew, and wasn't surprised to see him close his eyes and shake his head. This wasn't turning out to be a good day for my Captain.

Marcus Cole gave a cheery greeting in his strong English accent. "Here you all are then. Good to see you again, General Lochley. Captain, Commander, Captain, Chief." He was punctilious in nodding to each of us as he rubbed his hands together and grinned. "I think this is going to turn out to be quite exciting, don't you? Have you all met my colleague?"

He waved at the man standing next to him, whose face and form were concealed beneath a cloak with a deep hood. The man lifted his hands and pushed back the hood evoking a soft groan from my Captain.

Matthew and I had indeed met him. Matthew was hardly likely to forget his encounter with this man and his ship. I suddenly realized that someone should really warn Ben Marriot. He now had Angel, Marcus Cole and Captain Malcolm Fillion on his station, and it was inevitable that they would soon meet. I had to wonder if B5 would survive.

Gideon

I closed my eyes and prayed to the great God Booji that this wasn't happening, but Booji wasn't listening. Maybe I should've worn a bucket on my head. Booji would have liked that.

Have you ever heard one of those cheesy voice-over ads for a blockbuster movie? The one where the guy with the deep bass, resounding voice roars on about the disaster that's facing the universe. That voice was speaking in my head:

"Long ago and far, far away the ancients made a machine that could destroy the universe. But they made it too well. It was indestructible. To save their galaxy, the ancients split the machine into three parts and sent the segments to the far corners of the universe. Now those parts are drawing near to each other again. If they meet, the galaxy will be destroyed. Can Captain Gideon, brave leader of the war weary crew of the star-ship Excalibur, prevent this disaster? Can he stop this terrifying union? Watch 'The Last Battle' and find out."

You know who the three parts are, don't you? The prospect of having Angelique Denier, Marcus Cole and Malcolm Fillion all on one space station was enough to make me want to run back to my ship and hide under the covers of my bed, preferably with Half-Ted for company. Sucking on his ear seemed to make my son feel better, so maybe it would work for me, too.

I thought about running screaming from Ben's office, but decided that wouldn't be fair on my old friend. I ought to warn him at least. He ought to know that there was a very good chance that his space station would be destroyed within the next few hours. Plus I'm sure Liz would have tracked me down, slapped me silly and dragged me back into the office while I cried, kicked and screamed like my son having a temper tantrum.

Marcus Cole's chatter eventually penetrated my panic, and I opened my eyes to see Malcolm Fillion holding his hand out toward me, saying, "Good to see you again, Captain. Just try not to get any ideas about ejecting me forcefully from B5, will you? I've only just recovered from the way you booted the Lion off your flight deck."

I took his hand and smiled. The memory of how I'd ejected Fillion's ship brought back fond memories, giving me a warm, fuzzy moment, which helped quell the panic. I just wish I had a record of the look on Fillion's face when we'd kicked him out.

"No plans on doing anything right now, Captain Fillion. Just make sure you don't take any unauthorized rides on my property and we should get along just fine."

Fillion narrowed his eyes and I couldn't be sure whether it was from pain--I had maneuvered my hand to a position where I could crush his fingers in my grip--or from trying to work out exactly what property I was referring to. I let go of his hand and was pleased to see him surreptitiously flexing his fingers, trying to get some feeling back into them.

While Fillion and I had been doing our imitations of two stags in mating season--you could have gotten testosterone poisoning just breathing the atmosphere in the room right then--Ben had pulled up two more chairs to the table. He now called us back to our seats.

I sat next to John again, while Ben and Zack went back to their positions on the sofa opposite. Marcus and Fillion sat in the chairs at the end of the coffee table, and we all looked up at Lochley, who remained

standing with her back to the window. I suppressed an ungenerous thought that Liz was almost certainly in her element, looking down at six subordinate men. She always did prefer to be on top. And Liz reckoned that I'm a ruggedly handsome control freak!

She took up her story again, saying, "Captain Gideon asked a few moments ago why he and the Excalibur have been called here. Now we're all here, I'll answer that question in more detail."

Lochley gave me a quick smile and said, "The first reason is that the Excalibur is still the fastest, most powerful ship in the ISA, with the best Captain and crew the ISA has to offer." I almost blushed at the compliment. Almost. I would have done if I hadn't known it was true. The Excalibur was the best, bar none.

Lochley went on, "We may need the best and the fastest on our side if it comes to a fight. If there are more of those Shadow Tech destroyers out there, even White Stars may not be enough. We know that Ivanova's White Star fleet went up against these ships and won, but they paid a terrible price for that victory. It took a concerted attack by several White Stars on each destroyer, and many lives were lost in the process. The only weapon that's proved able to destroy one of those ships quickly is the Excalibur's main gun. So we want the Excalibur close at hand when we start the final stage of this investigation."

I nodded. It made sense. But that still left a loose end.

"You said that was the first reason. What's the second?"

General Lochley's eyes shifted from me to John, sitting next to me. She gave a sad little smile, and my stomach dropped.

"I mentioned earlier that our information indicates the Raider representative may be a telepath. If that's the case, he or she could turn our agent," she nodded toward Fillion, "inside out. One deep scan and they'd know everything he knows. We would also lose a valuable agent."

Fillion raised an eyebrow and I'm sure he appreciated Lochley's priorities. Mission first, personnel second.

The General continued, "The only way we can prevent that is to send in a telepath with Ranger Fillion when he meets his contacts. We need someone rated P5 or stronger, as only someone of that rating would be able to detect a scan, and block it for long enough to allow help to arrive. There's only one telepath in Earthforce rated higher than a P5 who President Sheridan and I agree can be trusted implicitly. I'm just hoping Commander Matheson will agree to volunteer for this assignment."

She smiled at John again, and I had absolutely no doubt that John would insist on volunteering. I wondered just how I was going to explain to Lily and Luke that we were sending their husband into a trap where his brain could be scrambled by a higher rated telepath.

Matheson

I took a deep breath and smiled back at Lochley, saying, "Whatever I can do to help, within the rules laid down by the Senate Committee of Metasensory Abilities, I'm happy to do. Subject to those restrictions, my abilities are at your disposal, General."

I did my best to hide the dread that I felt, but I was sure Matthew at least knew and understood my

apprehensions. While my friend had freed me from the tyranny of the regular interrogations by the 'Joneses' several years before, I still adhered meticulously to the rules laid down for all telepaths. To do anything else would have been a betrayal of my fellow teeps, and would have taken advantage of my unique exemption from the restrictions laid down for our behavior. I wasn't prepared to do that for anyone. I'd refused Matthew on more than one occasion when he'd wanted me to use my powers in a way forbidden by the rules. I wasn't about to give Lochley something I'd denied my friend and mentor.

Lochley frowned. She obviously didn't like the restrictions I was placing on my co-operation with her plan, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Marcus Cole nod and smile. I knew at once that I had one more supporter in the room. Matthew would back me up of course, but it seemed that I had the Ranger on my side, too. And not just any Ranger but one who had the trust and confidence of President Sheridan's wife, Delenn, the Entil'zha.

Though God knows why the way Marcus prattles on.

I maintained an expression of polite enquiry during the prolonged silence that followed my statement, a silence eventually broken when Malcolm Fillion leaned forward and said, "That's fine by me. If I understand those rules aright, then you can't initiate a scan without the subject's agreement, but you can yell your head off if you sense an unauthorized scan, and you can do your best to block it. Is that right?"

I nodded. "Yes. I can try to block any telepath who performs an illegal scan on me, or on any other person I know has not given their agreement. But you need to be aware of my limitations. I'm only a P6. If we come across a P11 or P12--someone who would have qualified to be a Psi Cop in the old days--any block I put up won't last more than seconds. They will probably be able cut through it like wet tissue paper."

That was my greatest fear. Fillion would be relying on me to protect him from mental attack, to defend him from a rogue telepathic Raider. If that teep was too strong for me, I might let him down. I'd been working with Lily, studying her blocking powers and increasing my skills, but Fillion and I could both end up with our brains emptied of all the information we knew, then fried. When I'd been in the Corps I'd seen people after Psi Cops had reamed them out. I never wanted to see that happen to anyone again, and I certainly didn't want it to happen to me.

Fillion nodded. "Understood. But you still give me a better chance than I have if I go in alone. So as long as you're willing to help, and as long as you understand the risks, I'd rather have you by my side." The undercover Ranger stood and gestured toward the door. "Teri is waiting outside. She'll take you where we can get you some clothes more in line with your new position as smuggler, thief and all-round scoundrel. Glad to have you on the team, Commander."

Fillion then took me by surprise. He held out his hand, waiting for me to shake it. As he did so, he looked me straight in the eyes and I knew at once what he was doing. He wanted to show me as clearly as he could that he trusted me completely. Only Matthew had ever done that for me before. Only he would shake my hand without a qualm, knowing that I would never betray him by reading his mind.

I took Fillion's hand and shook it firmly, keeping my blocks as high and hard as I knew how. Even so, the merest wisp of an emotion penetrated my shields.

Respect.

It made me straighten my back and hold my head high as I let go of his hand and marched toward the exit.

Gideon

I watched John leave with a degree of trepidation, but I knew there was nothing I could say or do to stop him. I wasn't even sure I should try. He might be the best chance we had of discovering who the rotten apples in Earthforce's barrel really were. And he might be Malcolm Fillion's only chance of getting out of this mission with his mind intact.

Thinking of the undercover Ranger made me turn toward him, only to find him studying me, looking a little sheepish, but obviously wanting something from me. It didn't take much imagination to guess what.

"I have a few hours before I meet the Humanity First representative, Captain. I was wondering whether you might be willing to give your permission for me to surreptitiously board the Excalibur and... uh... reacquaint myself with some of your crew. The ones who were so helpful to us during our last visit."

I narrowed my eyes and glared at Fillion, knowing exactly who he wanted to reacquaint himself with, and how he wanted to do it. If he had plans for using my wife's motorbike in the process he was very much mistaken.

Before I could answer him, Marcus also stepped forward. "Splendid idea, Mal. We could both visit, if that's all right with you, Captain. I'd love to meet your family again, particularly your charming sister-in-law, Angel."

If the thought of having the three of them together on B5 had been bad, the idea of a reunion on the Excalibur was ten times worse. I wasn't sure that the ten meter thick, Vorlon tech, plasteel hull would stand up under the strain.

It obviously wasn't my day for speaking, as before I could even open my mouth to let out the anguished scream of denial that Marcus' request provoked, Zack Allen said, "You don't have to go over to the Excalibur. Angelique Denier is on B5. Or at least she was an hour ago. I can check if she's still here if you like."

Like? LIKE? That particular word didn't belong anywhere near the idea of letting these three people get together. I tried to cover my horror and panic with a smile and a cheerful, "She's shopping with her sisters. It would be a brave man who'd try to interrupt that. I wouldn't recommend it, gentlemen. You may end up getting hauled around the Zocalo, carrying parcels."

Marcus narrowed his eyes and looked at me more carefully, then at Fillion. You could almost see him doing mental arithmetic and arriving at the correct sum. That Ranger is too damned perceptive for his own good at times. It was only the fact that he's married to Susan Ivanova--Terror of Earthforce, destroyer of Drakh and all around scariest woman in the galaxy--that stopped me from reaching out and gently shaking him by the throat. I didn't care much whether he stopped breathing, as long as he stopped talking!

I must have done something to seriously offend Booji that day, as Marcus grinned from ear to ear, then said, "I'm sure Ranger Fillion would be glad to provide Angel with any service she might need. He'd be happy to dedicate himself to her pleasure in any way he could. Any service he could perform for Angel would be his pleasure, too, wouldn't it, Mal?" Subtlety obviously wasn't one of Marcus' strong points. He looked at Fillion and winked before turning back to me and saying, "And you won't have to worry about

providing a shuttle to get her home after her shopping trip, Captain. I know Ranger Fillion would be happy to give her a ride."

Susan Ivanova had certainly done something for Marcus, and it took every ounce of my being not to find her and smack her around a few times for making Marcus Cole even worse than he'd been before.

But when I thought about it I realized that Ivanova would probably hit me back, and that would hurt, so I couldn't. But Booji knows it was tempting.

I had to keep repeating over and over in my head, [Ivanova will kill you if you kill him. She will kill you if you kill him.] Then I forced a smile to my face and said, "You don't need to trouble yourselves, Rangers. I'm quite sure I can provide any service Angel requires. And I'm always happy to give her a ride." If Marcus wasn't bothering to conceal his double meanings then why should I?

Now it was Fillion who was glaring at me, but before we could really get going, Lochley intervened. "Ranger Cole, Ranger Fillion, I know you have arrangements to make before this evening's meeting. Please don't let us keep you." This is the diplomatic way of saying, 'Fuck off, before you start a fight in here. Because if you start it, I'm going to finish it.'

Marcus and Fillion both bowed slightly to Lochley, then they nodded at Ben and Zack, gave me twin victorious grins, and scampered out of Ben's office, Fillion pulling his hood up over his head as he went. I just knew they were headed straight for the Zocalo, where they'd go looking for Angel. I wanted nothing more than to chase after them, but I had unfinished business to attend to. Duty can be a real pain in the ass at times.

I turned back to Lochley and asked, "OK, what happens next?"

Lochley waved me back to the sofa, and this time she sat next to me. She looked across at Ben and Zack, then back at me. "We wait. As Ranger Fillion said, his meeting with the Humanity First representative isn't until this afternoon. In..." she checked her hand link, "...four hours. Commander Matheson will stay with Ms. Stewart, Ranger Fillion's engineer, until the meeting. I would suggest that Zack and Ben go back to their normal duties, while you, Captain..." she turned to me and smiled, "You can go meet up with your family in the Zocalo and carry their parcels."

"Gee, thanks, Liz." I grinned as she glared at me again. She really hates it when I call her that.

I stood and gave her another crisp salute, before saying to Ben, "I'll be in touch after we find out what's going to happen next."

Ben nodded, so I started to leave his office. I wanted to get to the Zocalo as fast as possible. I had one big advantage over Marcus and Fillion. I had a pretty good idea of where the sisters would be by then.

To my surprise, Lochley followed me, saying a quick goodbye to Ben and Zack, then catching up with me as I strode down the corridor toward the Zocalo. Liz has long legs, but she had to stretch them to catch me. I looked around at her quizzically as she pulled alongside me, and I slowed my pace, wondering what she wanted. I would have expected her to hang back and let me get well clear before leaving Ben's office.

She gave me a tentative smile, and asked, "How's your wife, Matt?"

It appeared we were no longer operating on business terms. I wasn't altogether comfortable with that, and

it was discomfort that made me reply a little more sharply that I'd intended, "She's fine. How's yours?"

Lochley winced. "Ah. So you've heard. Well, that saves me the trouble of telling you. I'll see you later then." She started to accelerate away, but I reached out and touched her arm, making her pause and look back at me.

"Hold up a minute. Yes, I've heard. Sheridan told me. I'm happy for you, Liz. I mean that." And I did. I knew how much difference Deborah had made in my life and I hoped that Lochley's partner would do the same for her.

Liz gave me a slightly sheepish smile. "Thanks, Matt. That means a lot to me. I wasn't sure you'd understand."

I laughed and checked the corridor to make sure no one could overhear me before saying, "Well, it was a blow to my ego for a while."

Lochley grinned. "Nothing personal, Matt. I just needed something else, just like you did. Someone outside Earthforce, outside all the politics, who could just accept me as I am. Sandy has her own job, her own life. She doesn't sit alone, waiting for me to come home every night, complaining when I don't make it. But when I do get home, she's there for me. Completely."

I nodded, understanding exactly what she meant, and feeling a surge of gratitude for having found Deborah, and for the happiness she had brought me. "I'm glad you found that at last, Liz. That was something we'd never have been able to do for each other. We've both been damned lucky to find women who can give us everything we need."

Liz narrowed her eyes and glared at me. "That's as maybe, but if you call me 'Liz' one more time, I think I'll have you court-martialed, Captain. It's 'Elizabeth', Matt. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

*I laughed. "You don't scare me, Liz. If you try to lock me away, you'll have my wife to answer to, and she's a *really* scary lady!"*

Lochley's glare faded into a smile, then she laughed. "I only met her that once, but I can see what you mean. Next time you're on Earth, bring Deborah and Marcus around to see us. Sandy loves kids and she'd love to meet you. She's heard a lot about you."

She gave me an evil leer, then another brisk salute, before marching off down the corridor, leaving me staring at her butt. As views go, I've known worse. The sight of that butt brought back a lot of fond memories of how much better it had looked when it wasn't covered by an Earthforce uniform.

When Liz finally disappeared around the corner, I shook myself out of my reverie and set out once more toward the Zocalo, trying to work out how I was going to tell Lily that John wouldn't be coming back with us to the Excalibur.

Demon

I fell into the deep, comfortable chair in the café and breathed a loud sigh of relief. I'd forgotten how much I disliked shopping. My feet hurt, my legs ached, my back was sore and I was thirsty enough to drain one of B5's water tanks all by myself. Dropping my bags, I told myself to be grateful that most of the shops

we had visited were happy to deliver to the shuttle bay, so I hadn't had to haul all my son's birthday presents around with me.

Lily and Angel grinned at me as they dropped down onto the sofa opposite my chair, scattering their own bags around their feet. They had many more parcels than I had, but they still seemed to be full of energy and raring to go. They'd only reluctantly agreed to a break when I'd threatened a major temper tantrum in the middle of the Zocalo. They're both shop-aholics, and there's no known cure.

The waiter appeared at our side, and I looked up at him gratefully, almost begging him to bring me a large bottle of water, a pot of tea, and the biggest, gooiest chocolate éclair they had available.

This was the café Elizabeth Lochley had introduced me to, on my first visit to Babylon 5, three years before. It had wonderful cream cakes, all enormous, but their éclairs were their specialty. It was only the prospect of one of those cakes that had kept me going for the last hour.

My sisters placed their own orders, deciding to share a cake between them. They had seen the size of the pastries when we'd entered and agreed that there was no way they could eat a whole one each. Wimps.

Angel laughed at me as I lifted my leg and rubbed my sore foot. "It's no wonder your feet hurt, Demon. Those boots are nearly worn through. They don't give your feet any support at all."

I sighed sadly. She was right. I loved those boots, but the soles were worn paper-thin, and I should have thrown them out months before.

"Here, let me help." Lily leaned forward and grabbed my ankle, lifting my foot into her lap, and pulling my boot off. She then started to massage my sole and instep, gently but firmly. The blissful sensation of having my sister's tiny but strong fingers easing away the soreness made me lean back into my chair and sigh again, but this time with pleasure.

As Lily continued the massage, Angel started ferreting around in my bags. She looked up at me and gave a triumphant grin as she pulled out one of the new pairs of shoes I had finally found that morning. "Take those old boots off, and put these on. You'll be much more comfortable in them and then we can keep shopping for another few hours."

The idea filled me with horror, but I didn't complain as Lily pulled off my other boot, and started massaging my other sore foot. Angel swept my beloved old boots away into a bag, and put the new shoes out ready for me to wear. My sisters do take care of me, but they bully me, too, when they think I need it. It's very difficult to stand up to them when they unite against me for my own good.

I was silently mourning the demise of my long time friends--my boots--when the waiter brought our order. That cheered me up at once. The éclair was everything I'd remembered. Very large, bursting with cream, and with lavish layers of chocolate on top.

*I grabbed the water, took a long and very inelegant drink from the bottle, then leaned forward to tackle my cake. After a few moments of silent bliss, I was interrupted by Angel's laugh. "Demon, you are getting cream and chocolate *everywhere*! Can't you eat it more tidily?"*

I shook my head, and wiped some of the mess from around my mouth. "It's not possible to eat one of these without making a mess. They're just too gooey and sticky. I love them. I may have another."

I went back to gorging myself as my sisters laughed at me. Lily said, "I don't understand how anyone who is as obsessively tidy and orderly as you are, Demon, can make such a mess and not care."

Licking my lips to remove some of the cream moustache I had accumulated, I said, "This is different. This is an éclair!" If they didn't understand, that was their problem, not mine. I closed my eyes and abandoned myself to the pleasure of the tastes and textures in my mouth. This was almost as good as sex. Not quite. My husband is, after all, an incredible lover. Sensual, caring, forceful, demanding, giving, athletic, tender and above all, loving. Thinking about making love with Matthew, while closing my mouth around a large chocolate éclair, was making me hot and wet inside.

My pleasurable ponderings were rudely interrupted by a voice saying, "Hello! We thought we'd never find you."

I opened my eyes to see two people standing behind the sofa where my sisters sat. Angel gave a squeal of delight and flung herself off the sofa and into Marcus Cole's arms. He gave her a tight hug, then turned her around to face the other man, who reached up and pushed back the hood of the cloak he was wearing.

A part of me was really happy to see them both. Marcus was a sweetheart, and I knew how much Angel would enjoy a reunion with his companion. Another part of me was apprehensive. Did Matthew know that these men were here? He wouldn't be exactly delighted at their presence. I pushed those reservations out of my mind, telling myself that Matthew would just have to deal with it. The third part of me was wondering... did I still have chocolate on my face?

I looked across at Lily, and she looked back at me and winked. Then we both watched as Fillion stepped forward and took Angel into his arms. Their mouths met, and they started to devour each other with a similar level of enthusiasm and commitment to that I'd given my éclair.

Angel

*When we finally broke for breath, I looked up into Mal Fillion's dark blue eyes and grinned. He was holding me tightly against him, and I could feel his arousal. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him. I was hot and wet inside, and I wanted *him* inside me, NOW! My memories of our one night together were a little blurry--an unfortunate combination of some medicine I'd been taking with alcohol--but what I did remember was an awful lot of pleasure. This man had really known how to take a girl for a ride.*

Fortunately, I had bought plenty of new underwear, so he could rip the panties off of me. And the bra too!

Mal grinned back down at me, as I licked my lips and whispered, "Hello, Cowboy. Are you ready for another ride?"

With a soft chuckle, Mal leaned forward and whispered back, "You betcha. I've been polishing my saddle-horn all by myself these last few months. What I really need is a fine young filly to mount."

The muscles of my vagina clamped tightly shut, in anticipation of what it would feel like to have that hot cock deep inside me. I wanted him so badly it was all I could do not to start ripping his clothes off. I would have quite happily laid back on one of the café tables, with my legs spread high and wide, and let him take me there and then, while my sisters watched in horror.

Licking my dry lips again, I rubbed my chest against his and asked, "Have you got a handy stable?" My

nipples were so hard they hurt. My breath was coming in little pants of anticipation. I wanted him, and I knew I was going to get what I wanted, but how long would I have to wait?

"Surely do. With a nice soft bed of straw all laid out waiting."

Mal's hard cock was pressing into my belly, and it took all the self-control I possess--not much, of course--not to reach down and release it from his pants. The thought of doing that, then dropping to my knees to take him into my mouth, was enough to set my juices running.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

I only lingered long enough to wave goodbye to my sisters, asking them if they'd take my parcels back to the Excalibur with them. Demon shook her head, but I could see she didn't mean it, and the look on her face showed me that she was amused, and she approved of my Ranger cowboy.

Lily bounced to her feet, kissed me on the cheek, batted her eyelashes at Fillion--she never can resist flirting with a good-looking man--and told me to have a good time. Then Mal started to drag me out of the café. I just had time to blow a kiss to Marcus and tell him we'd talk later, before following my cowboy out into the Zocalo. I had no idea where he was taking me, but as long as it was somewhere I could get him naked without getting arrested, I didn't care.

Gideon

I arrived at the café where Liz had taken Deborah when they'd first met, and looked around inside for my wife and her sisters. I was pretty confident I'd find them there. Deborah had often reminisced about the éclairs she and Liz had eaten at the place. Sure enough, toward the back I saw Deborah, curled up in a large leather arm chair, her bare feet tucked up underneath her, as she smiled at the people sitting on the sofa opposite her, and sipped at a cup of tea.

*I paused for a moment, taking the opportunity to look at my wife, as she sat relaxed and happy. Have I told you how beautiful she is? Her long blonde curls were tied back into a loose pony tail, allowing me a clear view of her high cheekbones and large, golden brown eyes. I watched as she lifted her cup to her full, soft lips, and I felt a stirring deep down inside me. Lust, of course, but that wasn't all. A woman as beautiful and sexy as my wife can hardly fail to provoke *that* reaction in any hetero man. But what I felt for her went far beyond that.*

Every time I looked at her, I wanted to take her into my arms, kiss her, make love to her, but most of all, I wanted to shelter her, protect her, and let her know that I would always be there for her. She gave me so much love, reassurance, comfort and confidence, I sometimes felt that I could never give her enough to show her just how much I cared.

I'd nearly lost Deborah a few months before, and she still needed to gain a little weight to fully recover from that awful time, but as I watched her smiling, her cheeks pink and healthy, and her eyes sparkling, a wave of relief and gratitude swept through me that this woman was my wife.

Deborah must have sensed my feelings, for at that moment she looked up and saw me standing, watching her. If I'd thought she'd looked beautiful a moment before, it was nothing compared to how she looked when she saw me. Her face lit up with a smile that made her eyes glow with passion and love. I have no idea why she feels that way about me, but I give thanks every day that she does.

Uncurling herself from her chair, Deborah stood and walked toward me, her hips swaying as her long strides closed the gap between us. Then she was in my arms, her mouth yielding under mine, her soft breasts pressed against my chest, and for a moment I lost myself in our kiss. She tasted sweet, and when we finally broke apart, I grinned at her and said, "You've been eating éclairs. I can taste the chocolate."

Deborah pursed her beautiful lips and pretended to pout. "I've only had one." She paused and then gave me a naughty smile. "So far."

I laughed and steered her back toward the chair she had occupied, assuring her that I'd be happy if she ate every éclair in the café. I gave her butt a friendly pat and told her that I preferred her a little more rounded. I regretted that statement when she pushed me down into the chair, and lowered herself to sit on my knee. Deborah may be slender, but she's also tall, and that means she's no featherweight. I may prefer her figure to be a little rounder, but I certainly don't need her to weigh any more; not if she's going to sit in my lap.

Once I had her settled, I smiled across at the two people sitting on the sofa. It hadn't come as any great surprise to find that there was no sign of Angel or Captain Fillion. As soon as I'd seen the back of Marcus Cole's head, I'd known I was too late to prevent that reunion. Lochley had delayed me just long enough to allow the two Rangers to find the sisters, and for Angel and Fillion to depart.

*While watching my wife surreptitiously, I'd been careful to school my emotions, so that Deborah would catch no trace of the jealousy that the thought of Angel and Fillion being together evoked. Look, I know that I shouldn't be jealous of my sister-in-law making love to other men, and I know exactly what it says about me that I *am* jealous. I'm working on it, OK?*

"Where's John?" Lily was curled up in a corner of the sofa, sipping from her own cup.

I glanced across at Marcus and asked, "Didn't you tell her?" I'd hoped to be spared that task.

No such luck. Marcus shook his head. "I've only been here a few minutes. Haven't had chance as yet. We've been catching up on how my namesake is growing like a weed, and what his cousins have been up to. It's nice to hear about children doing so well growing up on a starship. I'd love to have children, but Susan says it's not really practical, not when she's..." Marcus stopped blathering as Lily whacked him on the arm and glared at him. She may be small but she can pack quite a punch.

"Where's John?" Lily isn't easily diverted once she gets a thought in her head, either.

Marcus rubbed his arm, and looked across at me, silent for once in his life. I sighed, then glanced around the café. It was obviously a place where people came not only to enjoy the delicious cakes but also to do business. Tables were spaced reasonably far apart and each came with a silencing device. That piece of equipment, when activated, created a cone of silence around each table. People inside could be sure that no one outside would overhear their conversation.

I reached around my wife, and activated the device on our table, waving away the waiter who was approaching to take my order. He nodded his understanding of our requirement for privacy and moved to another table. Turning my head slightly, so that no one would have a clear view of my lips, I told Lily where John was and what he was doing.

The little red-head listened in silence, her face showing her unhappiness with what she was hearing. I

couldn't deny that John's mission might be dangerous, but I tried to reassure Lily anyway.

"Don't worry, Lily. John and Fillion will be monitored at all times. We won't let anything bad happen to them. Zack Allen and his people will be ready to move in if they have to."

Lily pouted a little, saying, "I'd be happier if I knew G'Tan was nearby with some of his people."

I gave a sad laugh. "So would I, but half a dozen two meter tall Narns might be just a teeny bit conspicuous. John knows how to take care of himself, and I'm sure Captain Fillion can be quite handy in a fight. The Rangers train their people well."

I glanced across at Marcus, who immediately started to add his reassurances to mine. After a little while, Lily accepted that John was as safe as we could make him, and she leaned back in the sofa, looking pensive. The ensuing silence lengthened, until I couldn't help myself asking, "So where is Fillion?" It was a stupid question, as I didn't really want to know the answer.

Marcus looked at Lily, then across at me and Deborah, but before he could speak, my wife kissed my cheek and answered quietly, "He and Angel have gone off to enjoy the little time they have together. He said he'd bring her back here in two hours."

I checked my wrist link. That would give Fillion half an hour to link up with Teri Stewart and John before the time they were due to meet the Humanity First representative. I nodded and again made an effort to suppress my feelings. If I failed, Deborah gave no sign. Looking down at the bundle of parcels on the floor, I asked, "So have you finished your shopping?"

Deborah sighed. "No, not yet. We've gotten all Marcus' birthday presents, and they're being delivered to the shuttle. I also bought some shoes and boots, but I want to get you some new shirts, and we still haven't been to the lingerie shop Lily wanted to visit."

Giving my wife a squeeze, I kissed her cheek and said, "Why don't you and Lily leave all this stuff here? Marcus and I can look after your things while you finish your shopping. I can do without the shirts, but I really think you should spend as much time and money as you need buying new lingerie. Lots of it. And stockings. Black stockings would be nice."

Deborah gave a deep chuckle, turning her head to nibble at my ear as she whispered, "I'll give you a very private viewing in our quarters tonight."

That earned her another kiss, after which she reluctantly stood and pulled on the new shoes that lay on the floor by the chair. Want to take a guess what color they were?

Marcus and I watched as Deborah and Lily left the café, then I turned off the cone of silence and beckoned the waiter over. They had real coffee in that place.

Matheson

I ran my hand over my head for what must have been the fiftieth time and wondered what my partners would say about that aspect of my disguise. The bare skin under my fingers felt odd, and somehow the absence of my hair acting as insulation made me feel cold. I shivered a little, telling myself that the sensation was purely psychological. The temperature inside Babylon 5 is kept at a constant 20 to 22

degrees Celsius. I couldn't possibly be cold.

A waft of air across my sensitive scalp made me shiver again, and I turned to Teri Stewart and asked, "How much longer before Fillion gets back?"

It wasn't the first time I'd asked, and it wasn't the first time the engineer had shrugged her response, saying, "He'll be here when he needs to be. There's still nearly an hour before the time he arranged to meet the Humanity First guy."

I turned and looked back at the mirror hanging on the wall of the cramped and rather run-down room we were occupying. Stewart had brought me here after we'd met up outside Captain Marriot's office, when she'd thrown a cloak over my shoulders to conceal my uniform, and directed me to pull up the hood to hide my face.

When we'd arrived at what was obviously the cheapest accommodation B5 had available to rent, Stewart had ordered me to strip. When I'd hesitated, she'd laughed and said, "Don't worry, Commander, I have no ulterior motives. You're not my type. Now if you'd like to invite your wife or one of her sisters to join us, that would be a different matter."

She'd given me a saucy wink, then thrown a blanket at me, turning her back courteously while I took off my uniform. I'd then pulled the blanket around me and said, "I hope you don't expect me to leave the room wearing just this. It might attract more attention than we'd like."

Stewart had laughed as she turned to face me, waving at the bed in the corner, where I saw a rumpled pile of rather dirty clothing. "No, you can get dressed before we leave, but there's something I need to do first." Then she'd explained her plan to shave my head.

Looking at my reflection again, I had to admit it was a good plan. Now dressed in the shabby clothes, with dirt rubbed into my face, and my head shaven bare, I couldn't have looked less like an Earthforce officer. The nicks in my scalp where Stewart's inexpert shaving job had caught me just added to the overall picture. If I saw me coming, I'd have no difficulty believing that I was a smuggler and a rogue.

Passing my hand over my scalp again, I wondered how my partners would react when they saw me. Lily would probably have a fit, then go storming off to see Matthew, who she would proceed to verbally abuse. She might even hit him. Imagining that brought a smile to my face, as I realized it was a good thing that I'd been chosen for this mission rather than my Captain.

Matthew would deny it vehemently, but he was just a little vain about his luxuriant mane of hair. That was why he rarely cut it to the length required by Earthforce regulations. Since we'd been working for the ISA, he'd often let it grow long enough to start curling at the back. I can just imagine what Matthew's reaction would have been to a demand that he shaved his head. You would have been able to hear his protests from one end of Babylon 5 to the other.

The sound of the door opening distracted me from my thoughts, and I turned to see a hooded figure standing in the doorway. Malcolm Fillion pushed back his hood and nodded as he saw me. He looked tired and I noticed a mark on his neck that hadn't been there when I'd last seen him in Marriot's office. I wondered just what he'd been doing in the previous few hours, but before I could ask, he turned to Stewart, saying, "Good job, Teri. It won't fool anyone who knows him, but a stranger would never guess he's Earthforce." The Ranger turned to me and smiled. "Are you ready, John? I'll call you that, if you don't mind. Saves having to make up a name for you."

I nodded my acquiescence to both his question and his suggestion. "Where are we meeting the HF rep?"

Fillion pointed at the floor. "Downbelow. Where else?"

We worked our way through dark corridors piled high with litter that didn't bear too close an examination. Sometimes, bundles of what I had taken to be discarded clothing would move, and I'd realize that it was a person, huddled against the filthy walls.

I kept my mind firmly closed and my blocks high as we moved through Downbelow, but it wasn't enough. There were times when I wished I could close my eyes, too. I knew all the reasons why this area of the station existed, and I understood the impossibility of clearing it up, and moving these people on. Understanding didn't make it any better. I still believed firmly that somehow we should be doing more to help the people living in these conditions.

I shuddered as I remembered a time, years before, when a group of telepaths had tried to set up a colony in this part of B5. How had they lived here? How had they managed to block out the constant thoughts and pain that surrounded them? With my blocks as hard as I could make them, the chaos still seeped through into my mind, making my head ache.

I must have shaken my head, or done something to indicate my distress, as Fillion looked around at me and asked, "Are you OK?"

I nodded and grimaced. "Just a headache. This isn't a good place for a teep. Too much raw emotion."

Fillion looked at the heaps of litter that concealed people, the boxes and crates in which the inhabitants of this part of the station made their homes, and he nodded back, his face twisted into a grimace of sympathy. "I can imagine."

I wanted to tell him that he couldn't possibly imagine, that he had no idea how it felt to be a telepath wandering these corridors of pain, but I kept my mouth shut. There was no way to explain to a mundane. They could never really feel what others felt. A wave of loneliness nearly overwhelmed me, as I remembered a time when I had been unable to share my feelings with anyone. A time before Lily and Luke had come into my life and changed it completely. Back then, I could never have imagined the happiness I now enjoyed. I closed my eyes for a second, visualizing my partners and my children. Remembering them gave me the strength I needed to carry on.

Taking a deep breath, I followed Fillion around a corner into a wider area, with crates piled high around the walls. It was nearly as dark as the surrounding corridors, but a single spotlight, high up in the ceiling, created a pool of light in the center of the room, casting shadows around the periphery. Without hesitation, Fillion moved into the illuminated area, and I followed.

Standing still, Fillion lowered the hood of his cloak, and called out. "I'm here and I'm ready to deal." It was the signal he'd been instructed to give.

A voice came from the shadows behind me, a cultured voice that seemed vaguely familiar. "So I see. And you brought a friend. How nice. Why don't you introduce us?"

I started to lower my hood, turning to face the voice. A man emerged from the darkness into the pool of

light and as he did so, we both froze, the shock of recognition hitting us both at the same moment. Then I saw his mouth open, and he started to lift his arm toward his face. I knew he was about to activate a link, to scream out, alerting any companions he might have on the station to the fact that he had walked into a trap.

I did the only thing I could to save Fillion and me from discovery, something I had sworn to myself long before that I would never do. In doing so, I broke every rule laid down for telepaths, but it was my only option at that moment. I lashed out with my mind, hitting the man in front of me in the brain stem, freezing him into initial immobility, before he collapsed unconscious at my feet.

For a moment, neither Fillion nor I moved. I think we both expected our contact's companions to come rushing from the shadows to rescue their friend. No one appeared. I opened my mind a little and carried out a short range scan. Nothing. No one in range.

I turned to the Ranger and said softly, "He came alone."

Fillion took a hurried step forward, and dropped to his knees to examine the body. He looked up at me, and I could see the worry in his eyes as he asked, "Did you kill him?"

I shook my head. "Just knocked him out. He recognized me. He was about to call someone and tell them." I pointed to the commlink attached to the back of the man's hand.

Fillion nodded, then pressed his fingers to the man's neck. He sighed as he felt the pulse there. "He's alive. If he recognized you, I guess you must know him." I nodded. "Who is he?"

I took a deep breath and answered, "His name is Welles. We met on the Excalibur when he came to change the uniforms."

I sat with my back to a crate, my eyes closed, wondering how we were going to fix this problem. I knew Welles and he knew me. Although we hadn't had a great deal of contact during his time on the Excalibur--I'd spent more time being annoyed by his interior designer companion: Kevin--I'd done some checking on Welles, and found that during the time of Clark's presidency, he'd been a leading member of the infamous Nightwatch organization. That piece of information had been well hidden, and I'd never shared my findings with anyone. I'd hoped that perhaps the events on Earth at the end of the civil war had been enough to make him see the error of his ways. Apparently not. It didn't take a great stretch of imagination to envisage someone who had been a senior figure in the Nightwatch becoming a member and even a leader of Humanity First.

My head was throbbing, and I wasn't sure if it was from the effort of striking Welles unconscious, or from the pain of guilt at what I'd done. I kept trying to tell myself that I'd had no choice; if I hadn't done what I'd done, Fillion's cover would have been blown and all the work he had done to track the source of the Raiders' funding would have been for nothing. I wasn't doing a very good job of convincing myself.

It had only been a few seconds since Fillion had called for B5's Chief of Security over his commlink, but I opened my eyes as I heard the sound of feet thudding down the corridor leading to the room where I sat. Zack Allen's men must have been nearby all the time, monitoring our progress, but staying well concealed and out of range of the scan I'd performed.

Chief Allen led his men into the room, then gave brisk instructions to seal off the area. He squatted and

examined the unconscious man in the middle of room, then let out a soft whistle. "Well, well. I'd never expected to see this guy back on B5. And there's no record of him arriving. He must have been smuggled on board."

Fillion raised an eyebrow and asked, "You know him?"

Zack stood upright and nodded. "Yeah. He was my boss in the Nightwatch." Obviously amused by Fillion's startled look, he turned to look at me as I sat on the floor. "Are you OK? Do you need anything?"

I shook my head. "I'll be fine. Just give me a minute." Or an hour. Or a day. Maybe my head would stop throbbing by then.

Zack looked from me to Fillion and back again. "So what do you want to do with him?" He waved at Welles' body.

Fillion frowned and seemed undecided, so I sighed and pushed myself to my feet. "If we leave him here, someone will find him. And if you move him to the brig or to Medlab, there's a risk that someone will see him and recognize him. Let's get him over to the Excalibur. We can keep him sedated in our Medbay, until we decide what to do."

It was the best plan I could come up with. I just wanted to get home, and to hand this mess over to Matthew, who was much better at coming up with sneaky plans than I was.

Fillion agreed with my plan, but asked, "How do we move him without being seen?"

Zack grinned and waved at the crates stacked up against the wall. It looked like Mr. Welles was going to be traveling cargo class.

Gideon

I was wearing a track in the rug on the floor of Ben's office when the call came through from Zack Allen. Ben had tried to persuade me to return to the Excalibur with Deborah, Angel and Lily-I think he knew I was going to do some serious damage to his rug with my pacing-but I'd refused. There was no way I could go back to my ship, pretending that everything was fine and that I was a happy Captain, when my First Officer and friend was putting his life on the line.

Lochley and Marcus Cole had gone off to C&C, saying they needed to put together a report for Sheridan, which left me at a loose end. So much to Ben Marriot's irritation, I paced the floor of his office, while he tried to get on with his job. I think he found my pacing distracting, as he made several attempts to at least get me to sit down. His last try had involved him throwing a paperweight at me. I ducked in time, and all I can say is that it's a good job the windows of his office are made of unbreakable plexi-glass. If that hunk of metal had landed on someone out in the open area below, it could have done a lot of damage.

I'd turned to glare at my erstwhile friend when his commlink bleeped, and he quickly lifted his hand to answer the call. Zack's voice sounded tinny and echoed oddly as he told Ben there had been a slight problem. Fillion's contact in Humanity First had recognized John.

For a moment, I think my heart actually stopped beating. I had the weirdest sensation in my chest, like a void opening up inside me. Zack's next words closed the pit of guilt and despair that had for a moment

yawned wide, reassuring me.

"Matheson took care of it. We now have the contact unconscious here in Downbelow, and our plan is to move him over to the Excalibur Medbay, subject to Captain Gideon's approval."

Ben looked up at me quizzically, and I nodded. If that was what John wanted, I'd play along. Marriot passed on my acquiescence, then Zack went on, "Fillion is going to stay here on the station, but we need to get Matheson back to the Excalibur. The problem is that he's been seen, in his disguise, with Fillion on his way down here. We've talked it over, and the only way we can get Matheson back to his ship without blowing Fillion's cover is to send him back in a crate, along with the contact."

All the time Zack had been talking, my curiosity was piqued. Who was this contact who had recognized John? Why had John suggested taking him back to our Medbay? I hate not knowing what's going on. That's why my wife says I'm nosy. It was that character trait that led me to ask about John's disguise.

Zack chuckled as he described how John now looked. As he spoke, my curiosity disappeared under a wave of apprehension. Exactly what would Lily do to me when she found out that John was now bald, and we'd shipped him back to the Excalibur in a crate?

When I saw the Humanity First contact laid out on a bed in Medbay, I swear my eyes must have stood out on stalks. The last time I'd seen this man, he'd been massaging his throat, having nearly suffocated after being taken over by an alien consciousness. Guess who had been responsible for both those things happening to him?

I'd ordered--well, given some very heavy hints which my crew had picked up on--the opening of all the air-locks that had led to the suffocation part. I'd also been responsible for bringing aboard the alien, from which the invading consciousness had spread.

In the circumstances, Mr. Welles had no reason to be a big fan of mine. I wondered if it had been his experiences on the Excalibur that had turned him into a xenophobe. It would be hard to blame him if they had. Being controlled by an alien that has taken over your body and mind isn't anyone's idea of fun.

Zack Allen--who had accompanied me back to my ship, along with Ben Marriot, supposedly for a social dinner--quickly disabused me of that notion. Hearing Welles' history in the Nightwatch organization that had been created under President Clark made me remember a particular comment Welles had made. When he'd said that no one knew more about political survival than he did, he'd really known what he was talking about.

This slime-ball had supported the most xenophobic and corrupt government Earth had ever experienced, yet he'd survived to serve a new master after the overthrow of Clark. He exemplified what my friends and colleagues aboard the Agamemnon had fought and died to defeat. The very sight of him sickened me.

I turned to John, to see him rubbing his hand over his shaved scalp, looking worried. That made me realize that Welles was almost the least of my problems. No one outside Medbay had yet seen John, as the crate he and Welles had traveled in together had been delivered there unopened, and we'd cleared all the crew out of Medbay before the crate had arrived. Only my Chief Medical Officer had remained with me, Zack and Ben.

When John had emerged, Luke Raven had looked at him blankly for a moment, rigid with shock. Then he

had moved quickly to take his partner into his arms, hugging him fiercely. When they broke apart, Luke pushed John out to arms length and stared at him for a few moments, before whistling softly, and saying, "Lily is going to kill you!"

*John had chuckled, then turned to grin at me. "No she won't. She'll kill *him*. Well, she will when I tell her it's all his fault."*

With family like that, who needs enemies?

I think I must have paled a little, as Luke had started to laugh, saying, "Don't worry, Captain. I'm sure Demon will protect you. She won't let Lily do any permanent damage. Just watch out for that little dagger and you should be fine."

Any riposte I might have made was cut short as Zack and Ben carried Welles from the crate, and laid him out on a bed.

The five of us now stood around the bed, trying to work out what to do next. Fillion was waiting back on B5 for us to come up with something that would allow him to continue his mission.

How come I get all the easy jobs?

Matheson

I have to admit that I enjoyed teasing Matthew a little about what Lily would do to him, but any pleasure I felt soon dissipated as I watched Luke carrying out a brief but thorough examination of Welles. I heaved a silent sigh of relief when Luke confirmed that he was healthy, and that my mental blow to his brain stem had done no physical damage.

Luke straightened and reached for an injector, quickly administering a sedative to the unconscious man. "That should keep him out for a bit, while we work out what to do next."

That was the tricky part. Exactly what could we do? Welles had recognized me, and if he went back and told his contacts, Fillion's cover would be blown. But we couldn't just make Welles disappear, as that would stop Fillion's investigation dead in its tracks, and we'd be no nearer to finding out the identities of the corrupt element within Earthforce.

We stood around Welles' comatose form for a few seconds in silence, before Zack Allen said quietly, "Could Commander Matheson mind-wipe him? I've heard that teeps can do that. Cut out a section of someone's memory. It happened to a friend of mine once."

I shook my head vehemently, wondering who that friend of Zack's had been, and why he'd been subjected to that torture.

"Even if I could do that, and I can't, I wouldn't. Only a P10 plus can do a mind-wipe, and it's never precise. If you want to be sure you've taken out every relevant memory, you have to go wider, deeper into the mind. Most people who get mind-wiped end up as vegetables. If your friend survived the process, he was lucky."

As I spoke, I swallowed bile, remembering my days in Psi Corpss, when my class had been shown the victims of that abuse, as a warning to us all. Although never overtly stated, we all knew that if we failed

to follow orders, if we failed to commit to Psi Corpss with our bodies, minds and souls, then we too could end up drooling in a basement somewhere, as an object lesson for the next generation of teeps.

Matthew's hand squeezed my arm as he said softly, "We won't ask you to do anything your conscience won't allow, John."

I let out a slow breath as my Captain turned to Luke and asked, "Are there any drugs you can use on him, Luke? Short-term memories have to be easier to fudge than long term. People who've suffered head traumas often seem to lose their memories of the events immediately preceding the trauma. Can you duplicate that effect?"

Luke almost looked amused as he shook his head, saying, "I could get a mallet and try hitting him with it. Hard. That might do the trick, but we can't be certain it would work. We wouldn't know until he came around whether it had erased any memories, never mind the right ones."

Matthew gave a snort. "So much for the scientific approach. Do you keep a stock of voodoo dolls and newts around here, too?"

The exchange had lifted some of the tension in the room, and given me time to think. An inkling of an idea had crept into my brain, and I turned to my partner and asked, "Luke, do you remember that discussion we had about Crewman Reilly? You told me that he'd had an adverse reaction to the sedative given to him when he'd had his tooth removed. Something about how it combined with something he'd eaten, leaving him vague and wooly for hours afterwards. You said he couldn't even remember the toothache that had brought him in, screaming with pain, just an hour before."

As I spoke, Luke started to nod. I could see his eyes lighting up with excitement as he recalled the event. "Yes! I did some research later and worked out the factor that had led to the reaction. Now if I can only..." Without finishing his sentence, Luke dived through the doors into his office, and started calling up data onto his computer terminal.

While we waited for Luke to find what we needed, we all looked down at Welles again. He was sleeping peacefully, with a small smile turning up the corner of his mouth. I wondered what he was dreaming about. It didn't seem right that someone like him should have pleasant dreams. Why did he get to sleep peacefully, when people like Matthew and I were still plagued with the nightmares of our pasts?

After a few moments of silence, Mathew gave a soft sigh. I looked around and saw that he was looking at me with a slightly guilty expression on his face. I didn't need to be a teep to know what Matthew was thinking, but I refused to anticipate him. I waited and sure enough, after a few seconds hesitation, my Captain said, "John, I know I said I'd never ask you to do anything your conscience doesn't allow, but might it let you carry out a light scan? While he's sleeping, so he doesn't feel it. Just a really, really light surface scan, that wouldn't do him any harm at all, but might pick up something we can use. Accidentally of course, while you're doing a scan to make sure he's healthy."

Matthew's wheedling, ingratiating tone almost made me laugh. I made a silent bet to myself that when he uses that tone of voice, and turns those puppy dog eyes on Demon, she gives him whatever he wants. There was no doubt at all where Marcus Gideon had got his persuasive abilities from. Young Marcus was his father's son.

I tried to look stern, but Matthew looked so hopeful I couldn't help but say, laughingly, "OK. A very, very light scan. Just to make sure he's healthy."

I reached out and touched Welles' forehead, sliding my mind into his dreams. The thing about a surface scan is that you can only go where your subject takes you. You can't steer him in any direction. So I just had to go with the flow of Welles' dreams, catching odd images, disassociated words, pictures of places and people that meant nothing to me, that changed and shifted constantly, making me feel dizzy and nauseous. What I could see and understand disgusted me. Welles had a mind like a sewer. Even drifting on the surface of his thoughts made me feel dirt and corrupt. I stayed in his dreams for as long as I could, but all too soon I felt myself drowning, sinking further into the stinking chaos, and I had to get out.

I broke away with a gasp, and felt Matthew's arm around me, holding me up. I wanted to retch, to vomit up the memories of some of the things I'd seen. Welles' mind had not been a pretty place, but none of it had really made sense. None of it seemed to relate to his current mission. Except possibly one thing. One image of stability amongst the chaos.

I gasped out a single word, "Blonde," before rushing to the Medbay bathroom to heave.

Gideon

I watched in concern as John rushed out of the room, and turned to Zack and Ben, asking, "Does that mean anything to you? Blonde?"

They both shook their heads, and we waited in silence again for John and Luke to return. The pause gave me the opportunity to brood. It's something I'm very, very good at. Deborah says I could compete in the Galactic Olympics, if they had a brooding event. All I can say is that years of practice pay off. Having Deborah and Marcus around means that I don't do it so much any more, but I like to keep my hand in and this seemed like a good opportunity.

What sort of man was I? Could I really think myself any better than the unconscious slime in front of me? I'd just asked my best friend to do something that had sickened him to his stomach, making him physically ill, and that was after I'd sent him into unknown danger, asking him to risk his life to get information I should have obtained months before. If I could have found a way to capture the Raider ship in the fight off Aris, none of this would have been necessary. John was now paying the price for my failure.

A soft voice in my ear roused me from my introspection. "Stop it, Matt. It's not your fault."

I looked around to see Ben Marriot smiling at me ruefully. He knows me too well. He knew I was indulging in a bout of self-hatred and spiritual self-flagellation.

I shook my head. "Isn't it?"

Before I could say more, Luke and John both returned to the room. John's color had returned, and Luke had a wide grin on his face.

"I've got it. If I combine two drugs in the right doses, Mr. Welles won't remember a thing that has happened to him during the last four to six hours."

The tension lifting from the room was almost palpable. We could dose up Welles, put him back in his crate, and send him back to Fillion on B5. There he would wake up and Fillion could spin him some line

about him having fainted and hit his head. I decided that I could quite enjoy giving Welles the necessary contusion, but somehow I doubted if Luke would let me.

I never get to have any fun.

Well, almost never.

Calling Fillion on a shielded frequency used only by the Rangers, we quickly made arrangements for John and Welles to travel back to B5 in the crate. Zack made arrangements for the crate to be collected from the docking bay and taken back down to Downbelow, where John would be met by Fillion. While the Ranger roused Welles, John would hide nearby, where he could keep a mental track on the Ranger, without being seen, and protect him if necessary. It wasn't ideal, but it should work.

Neither John nor Luke looked particularly happy about the plan, but none of us could see an alternative, so we moved Welles back into the crate and after one last hug with his partner, John climbed in, too.

I called for crewmen to collect the crate and take it back down to the landing bay, and then went to leave Medbay with Ben and Zack. Before I could get away, Luke called me back.

"Hold up a minute, Captain. There's one job you need to do before you can go back to B5."

My CMO rarely tries to give me orders, but I could tell by the determined look on his face that this time he was serious. I asked Ben and Zack to go on ahead and wait for me outside, then I turned and gave Luke a quizzical look.

A malicious grin spread across his face as he said, "There's a certain red-headed witch sitting in our quarters, waiting to hear what's happened to John. I suspect that by now, she's stewing nicely. I think you should go tell her that a) she's not going to be sharing a bed with him tonight and b) that he's had his head shaved."

I tried the puppy-dog pleading look that worked so well with my wife, but Luke wasn't having any of it. Eventually I gave up and slunk out of Medbay with my tail between my legs. Ben and Zack were waiting outside. I told them to go back to B5 and I'd come over later.

"If I live that long."

Telling myself that it was stupid to be scared of Lily, that she was barely one and a half meters tall and weighed next to nothing, I crept down the corridors toward her quarters.

I was doomed and I knew it.

When the doors to Lily's rooms opened, I was hugely relieved to see my wife sitting on the sofa next to her sister, and all four children playing together on the floor in front of them. There was no way Lily would spill blood in front of the kids, and if she tried, Deborah would protect me.

Deborah rose from the sofa and came over to kiss me as I entered the room. I slipped my arm around her waist, and held her against my side, enjoying the warmth of her body against mine. OK, so I was keeping her between me and Lily. I'm not entirely stupid, you know.

I gave Lily a cheerful smile, and waved at the children, who had looked up briefly when I'd entered the room, then gone back to their game, which they were playing with ferocious concentration. I had no idea what they were up to, but they were quiet and whatever they were doing didn't seem to involve anything that would leave permanent stains or scars on themselves and neither did it involve disemboweling Half-Ted, so it was fine as far as I was concerned.

"Where's John?"

I might have known those would be the first words out of Lily's mouth. She can be very focused when she wants to be.

"He's gone back to B5." The words were out before I could stop them. I mentally kicked myself the length of the bullet car tubes and back, as I watched the frown gather on Lily's forehead.

"Back? What do you mean, 'back'? Has he been here? Why didn't you say? Why didn't we get to see him?" I didn't need my wife's empathic powers to sense that Lily was building up a head of steam. It was like watching a tiny volcano. The ground was trembling, and steam was starting to break out of fissures. The only question was just when she would blow.

Before I could answer, I saw Lily close her eyes, and a quick glance at my wife showed that she too had her eyes shut, and she had the soft smile on her face that appears when she's sending to her sisters. Whatever Deborah sent to Lily seemed to do the trick, as when Lily opened her eyes again, they weren't spitting emerald green laser beams at me any more.

Deborah slipped away from my side, and stooped to talk to the children. "Dasha, would you let Marcus see the new toys your Ma got you on B5? And maybe Faylinn and Naima could show him their new things, too."

With a little grumbling, the children picked up their papers and crayons and retreated into the bedroom the twins shared. I watched them leave with mixed feelings. One of my layers of protection had just left. Now I only had Deborah to defend me from the little red-headed firecracker who now stood in front of me, hands on hips, pouting.

For some reason, I got a sudden urge to place my hands protectively over my groin. The thought of what Lily's long fingernails could do to my balls made them shrivel and try to retreat up into my body.

I tried another appealing smile, and waved Lily toward the sofa. "Sit down, and I'll tell you everything." If she was sitting, it would give me a head start if I needed to flee for my life..

My darling wife, who I adore and don't deserve, moved to Lily's side and steered her back to the couch, then sat down beside her, holding her arm lightly. She was positioned perfectly to restrain Lily if she launched an attack on me.

I sat down in a chair far enough away to be out of reach of Lily's claws, and told her what had happened. To be fair, the little red-head listened patiently, and seemed to relax when she realized that John was safe and well. That all came to an end when she asked me how John had been disguised.

*"Bald? You shaved his head **BALD?**" I think they probably heard that last word over on B5. There are some sounds so loud that they *will* travel through a vacuum.*

It took a lot of sweet talking from me and from Deborah, before Lily calmed enough to listen again. I assured her that I was on my way back over to B5, where I would personally make sure that Zack Allen's security team guarded John's health and safety with their lives. I explained that now Welles was involved, John would be monitoring Fillion from hiding, not exposing himself to the HF rep or to the Raider contact. I didn't mention he'd be doing so from inside another crate, as I knew that would just set Lily off again. What I did make clear was that while the risk to John had diminished significantly due to this complication, the risks for Captain Fillion had increased to the same degree.

I swear that I didn't smile when I mentioned that last issue, but from the look I got from Deborah, I guess I didn't totally conceal my feelings. Being married to an empath can be a pain in the ass at times.

Glancing at the clock in Lily's room, I stood and told her I had to leave. "Ben and Zack are waiting for me. The rendezvous with the Raider contact could be any time now."

*Lily reluctantly agreed to let me go, but while Deborah went to collect Marcus, she moved to stand close to me, and glared up at me saying, "If John's hair doesn't grow back right, Captain, you'd better watch out. I may come after you with my little dagger some dark night, and then we'll see what *you* look like bald."*

I backed away slowly, holding my hands out in front of me, giving her my very best pacifying smile. "Don't do anything rash, Lily."

Deborah's voice sounded from the open door to the bedroom, where she stood with our son in her arms. "That's right, Lily. Touch one hair on Matthew's head, and Angel and I will come after you. It would be a shame to see all that lovely red hair used as stuffing for a pillow, now wouldn't it?"

My wife scares the hell out of me when she talks like that, but Lily was made of sterner stuff. She raised her chin and glared defiantly back at her big sister.

"Try that, and my red hair would be joined in that cushion by some blonde curls and raven locks."

I suddenly had this image of where such a vendetta could end. If we weren't careful, everyone on the Excalibur could end up bald, which might make the Narns and Minbari feel at home, but would be damned difficult to explain to anyone else.

"Ladies, please. None of this is necessary. John will soon be back safe and sound, and we can all sleep sound in our beds at night."

Deborah joined me at the door and we left to Lily's muttered, "I need both my men in my bed if I'm going to sleep sound!"

Matheson

If anyone had told me that I'd spend most of this mission inside a crate, with a draft-I know the crate was air-tight, but there was still a draft, OK?--making my shaven head feel more than a little chilly, and a cramp in my right leg that just wouldn't let up, I'd have told them what to do with their mission. Danger and intrigue are all very well, but why do they have to be so damned uncomfortable?

I shifted inside the confined space of my crate again, looking into the pocket sized monitor I held. It showed a perfect, if small, picture of what was happening just down the corridor from where I was

hiding. Sound came through an ear piece built into the breather unit I was wearing. Before he had left, Zack had set up a tiny hidden camera high up in the corridor, and it was from there that I was receiving the images and sound. Ranger Fillion squatted next to the still unconscious form of Welles, reaching out to shake his shoulder gently. Fillion had been doing that every few minutes for the last half hour, and I could tell he was getting anxious. He wasn't the only one.

Luke had assured me that Welles would come around as soon as we gave him the appropriate stimulant, which Fillion had sprayed into Welles nostrils thirty minutes earlier. Nothing had happened then, and nothing had happened since.

I shifted again, trying to move silently, as I eased my cramped leg into a more comfortable position. Not that any position inside that damned crate was comfortable. The only thing that could be said for it was that it concealed me from sight, and Zack had assured me that sensors would not be able to pick up my life signs through the insulating material, so no electronic scan would detect me. My greatest concern was whether my air-supply would last long enough. If Welles didn't wake up within the next couple of hours, I might run out of auxiliary tanks for the breather unit.

It didn't help that I had to keep my mind wide open, to pick up the mental signature of anyone approaching the area where Fillion was watching over Welles. I'd recognize a telepathic signature as soon as it approached, but in the meantime, I was hearing all the mental and emotional noise in the area, which wasn't exactly fun. My head throbbed, my leg ached, and I decided that I was probably going down with a cold from the unaccustomed exposure of my scalp to the elements. And don't tell me there are no elements on B5. There was a draft. I could feel it.

Just to prove my point, my nose started tingling and I knew I was going to sneeze. That was a problem, as the crate might be shielded against scanners, but it wasn't soundproof. If anyone walked past just at that moment, they might wonder what sort of crate made a noise like that. I stuffed my hand up under the breather unit and held my nose until the sneeze went away, leaving my eyes watering and my nose burning.

It was turning out to be one of those days and I found myself mentally muttering that I wished Matthew had been a telepath, so he could be the one stuck in a crate with his head shaved and a nasty cold coming on. Then I thought a bit more about just what the universe would be like if it contained a telepathic Matthew Gideon, and I shuddered. It really doesn't bear thinking about. He'd have broken every bank in New Vegas before he was fifteen years old.

I gave a silent sigh and glared at the little monitor again. To my great joy and relief, Welles started to moan and twitch as I watched. Fillion reached down and shook his shoulder again, saying, "Hey, wake up! You can't keep lying around here all day."

Welles groaned and lifted a hand to his forehead, rubbing it gingerly. After the zap in the brainstem I gave him, he'd almost certainly have a headache. I told myself not to feel guilty about it, and continued to watch and listen avidly, all the while keeping my senses wide open to detect anyone approaching.

Welles sat upright, still clutching his head, and gasped, "What hit me?"

Fillion still squatted by his side. He shook his head, and said, "The floor hit you. We were talking when your eyes rolled back, and you went down in a heap. I dragged you into this corridor, out of the way. You've been out for hours. Do you have some sort of medical problem? You ought to get it looked at. Anyone else might have just left you, and that might not be healthy in this part of the station."

Welles was obviously regaining his composure, as he looked up at Fillion and asked, "So why didn't you leave? Why so solicitous?" The older man made an attempt to stand, staggering slightly. Fillion sprang to his feet, steadying Welles and half-supporting him as he found his balance.

The Ranger grinned. "Don't think it was out of the goodness of my heart. My own mother says I don't possess such an organ, but she's biased. I think I'd just sold my grandmother to a passing trader at the time she made that comment. This is business. I have goods to sell. My contacts say you know someone who wants to buy at a good price. That was worth investing a little time and effort, but I'm looking for a return on my investment. Let's get this deal moving."

Welles shook his head, trying to clear it. "Where's your partner? There was someone else here, wasn't there?"

I froze inside my crate. Luke's cocktail of drugs obviously hadn't been as effective as he'd thought. Welles remembered our earlier encounter.

I had to admire Fillion's mendacity as he casually shook his head and said, "Just me. You must have really banged your head as you went down, bud."

If I hadn't known better I might have believed him myself. I decided I'd love to see Fillion and Matthew in a poker game sometime. This was one man who might just stand a chance against my Captain.

Welles shook his head again. He muttered something to himself, then straightened and pulled himself together. "I believe you have a list for me to examine. When I'm satisfied that you have the goods my friends want, I'll call them. Then we can arrange a rendezvous."

Fillion nodded and handed over a datapad. As Welles perused the list, the Ranger asked casually, "Will your friends have hung around? Won't they have been expecting your call a while back?" Any anxiety Fillion might have shown could easily be explained by his desire not to lose a potential buyer, but to me, the Ranger looked totally relaxed and not in the least concerned. Even his mental activity was smooth and calm.

Welles shook his head as he carried on reading. "They'll stay on the station until they hear from me." He clicked the page turning control several times, and the silence between the two men lengthened. If I'd been in Fillion's place I would have been sweating by this point, but the Ranger looked as cool and relaxed as ever.

When Welles reached the end of the list, he looked up at Fillion and smiled. "If you can deliver on this list, my friends will be willing to pay a generous price. Do you have the goods here?" I wasn't reading his mind, but my senses were open far enough to be sure he was telling the truth. I gave a little sigh of relief and continued to listen and watch carefully.

Fillion laughed. "Not a chance. I don't even know the exact co-ordinates of the hiding place. When we've agreed the price, I'll call my friends and get the details. That way you can't try to beat the details out of me and steal the goods."

Welles gave the Ranger a sorrowful look. "Tsk tsk, my friend. So distrustful. Let me call my contact and we'll set up a meeting later..."

The older man trailed off as Fillion shook his head. "That ain't how this deal is going down. We've wasted

enough time because of your little medical problem. You call them with this location." He gave the corridor and level number. "And we'll meet your friends right here. I don't want you, or that list, out of my sight until the deal is completed and a price agreed."

It was essential that Fillion didn't move from his current location as I'd be unable to follow and shield him. The Ranger and Welles argued for a while, but eventually Welles agreed to call his contact. He moved to one side of the corridor and spoke quietly into a commlink. I couldn't hear what he said over the transmitter, but again, I could sense his veracity. He was doing exactly what he'd said he'd do.

The next half hour felt like an eternity. Fillion and Welles said little to each other, I changed the air tank on my breather again, wincing as I realized I had only one more spare. Then the cramp in my leg, which had retreated while I'd watched and listened to their earlier exchanges, returned with a vengeance. I massaged my calf as best I could, but I knew the only way I could really get rid of it was to stamp around the floor for a while. Not very practical just then. I passed the time imagining just what Lily's reaction would be when she saw me, and what exactly she might do to Matthew as revenge. The pictures in my head were rather satisfying, but I regretfully concluded they were pure fantasy. Demon would never let Lily get away with half the things I imagined Lily perpetrating on my Captain.

Which was a shame as I have a very vivid imagination.

My attention snapped back to the present when I felt a new mental signature approaching. It wasn't a signature I recognized, but the outline was all too familiar. This was a telepath.

I closed my own shields tightly, hiding myself. Using skills I had developed as a child, I cloaked my presence from my fellow telepath but kept my mental ears metaphorically pricked. I can't really explain how I do this, but it was something I'd developed when I was at school in Teeptown, to guard my privacy as much as possible, while staying aware of other telepaths around me.

Watching the monitor, I saw a figure emerge from the shadows of the corridor and the meaning of the single word I had picked from Welles' brain was immediately apparent. A tall, slender blonde woman, dressed in a severe business suit, and still wearing the black leather gloves that had once marked teeps apart from the rest of humanity, walked into the illuminated area where Welles and Fillion stood.

Her features were hard and icy, her almost white-blond hair smooth, falling straight to her shoulders, with not a curl or a wave to mar the almost mirror like shine. When she spoke, her voice was harsh, with a North American Earth accent.

"Captain Fillion. I believe you have something I would like to buy."

Fillion nodded his head. "That's right. But it hardly seems fair that you know my name, when I don't know yours."

The smile she gave him was chilling. If I'd ever thought Demon was an ice queen, seeing this woman made me realize how mistaken I'd been. Demon was a pussycat by comparison.

"I was once known in this place as Talia. That's as good a name as any."

Angel

I curled up on the sofa in my quarters, tired but happy. I ached a little from the unaccustomed and somewhat strenuous exercise I had indulged in that afternoon, and I felt a little sore inside, from where Mal's cock had hammered into me repeatedly, but it was a good sore, a satisfying sore, which sent waves of warmth and contentment through my body.

Yet again, my cowboy had given his filly one hell of a ride.

The looks my sisters had given me when I had rejoined them in the departure area of B5 had been amused and indulgent. While Demon couldn't read my feelings in the way she could other people, I somehow doubt that she'd needed her empathic powers to know just how contented and satisfied I was at that moment, even though I was walking with a slight limp. I'd tried to straighten my tangled hair, but nothing could conceal my swollen lips, and my nipples were doing their usual imitation of tent pegs.

Memories of the things Mal had done to get me in that state provoked a swell of heat deep inside me, and sore as I was, I couldn't wait until the next stage of Mal's mission on B5 was over, as he had promised he'd come back to see me again then. Not that seeing each other was exactly high on our agenda. Fucking each other like mad minks was more what we had in mind.

I had no illusions about what I felt for my cowboy. It was pure, unadulterated lust, on both sides. Sure, we liked each other well enough, but what we both wanted was to get naked and physical as fast as possible.

What I wanted from Mal was completely different to the solace I had sought in the shelter of Captain Dylan Hunt's arms a couple of months before. Then I had needed tenderness and affection. Now I needed sex. Raw, hard, hot and heavy sex. And Mal Fillion was just the man to give me what I wanted.

If I'd thought he was good the first time we'd met, I'd been even more impressed that afternoon, in the rooms he had rented on B5. We had used every piece of furniture in that room, as well as the walls and the floor. Hell, if we'd had a little longer, we'd have figured out a way to use the ceiling, too.

Who needed the Captain's bike?

Yeah, yeah, I know that technically it's Demon's bike, as Matt had given it to her as a Christmas present, but we all knew that was one of Demon's little fictions. Matt was the one who liked to ride it most, and everyone on the Excalibur knew he took it out for a spin most days. Knowing that we were abusing the Captain's pride and joy had made my first session with Mal even more fun. That night may well have been a little blurry from the combination of the medicine I'd been taking and a small quantity of alcohol, but what I could remember was enough to get me hot and wet all over again.

Suppressing the wave of lust that swept through me, I glanced at the clock and pouted. How much longer would I have to wait for his call?

Damn it! It didn't matter what century I lived in, or where I was in space, men didn't change. They never called you when they said they would.

Matheson

The name was somehow familiar but I couldn't place it. What I did know, and felt enormous relief about, was that Talia was a lower level teep than me. A P5 at most, I would have expected her to be a

commercial telepath, working for corporations, rather than a representative of the Raiders. What was interesting was that she still wore the stigmata of the Psi Corpss: the black leather gloves. Was that a demonstration of her continuing loyalty to an organization that no longer existed? Or was there some place in the galaxy where the Psi Corpss still operated?

I shuddered as I remembered rumors of a secret Psi Corpss black operations unit, and the mother-ship they had used as a base of operations. Hadn't Bester's Black Omega star-fury squadron had a mobile home base? The presence of this blonde telepath who still wore those gloves suddenly made all those rumors of conspiracies seem somehow much more likely.

All these thoughts had rushed through my mind as Talia and Fillion had exchanged names, but I'd kept my guard up all that time, alert for any attempt the rogue telepath might make to conduct an illegal scan on the Ranger. It was a good thing I'd stayed alert, as she tried to strike just after she'd given him her name.

I felt her mind expand and focus, hardening into a penetrating scan, designed to suck Fillion's brain dry. It took everything I had to erect a shield around him, hard enough to make Talia's scan bounce, recoiling into her own brain. I watched in the monitor as she staggered back, raising her gloved hand to her forehead, disturbing the mirror like smoothness of her blonde hair.

I gave silent thanks for the hours I'd spent studying with Lily, working with her to find the source of her amazing blocking powers. While my wife is no telepath, the Vorlons had somehow developed in her the ability to throw up the strongest, hardest telepathic shield I have ever encountered. Trained Psi Cops, P11s and P12s, couldn't penetrate Lily's block. Studying with her had developed my own blocking skills well beyond those normal for a mere P6. I needed every bit of power and skill I possessed at that moment, as I bounced Talia's scan.

The blonde teep shook her head, licking her lips, and brushing hair back from her suddenly sweaty brow. She gasped, "How did you do that? You're not a teep."

Fillion smirked at her. "And you're not supposed to try to scramble my brains." The Ranger had obviously realized what must have happened when Talia staggered back. He turned to Welles, his face filling with anger. "I didn't come here to have my mind turned inside out by a teep. The deal's off."

The Ranger turned and started to move away, but Welles quickly grasped his arm, pleading with him to return to the negotiations. "Just a misunderstanding, Captain. Talia was just going to carry out a surface scan, to check that you are what you purport to be. Just a precaution, I assure you."

He lied, of course. That had been no surface scan Talia had tried. It had been a deep scan which would have turned Fillion into a drooling wreck, at least temporarily. Even a P5 can do some serious damage to a mundane's mind with that sort of examination. Not a nice lady.

Fillion scowled again, but allowed himself to be persuaded to return to the negotiations. By this time, Talia had collected herself, and was peering closely at Fillion, obviously trying to work out how he had blocked her. I felt her raise her own shields, and smiled to myself. She was lucky I was scrupulous about the use of my own powers, even on criminals like her and Welles. Up to that moment I could have turned her head inside out, spilling all the knowledge inside, without her even being aware. Perhaps I should have done that. In the long term it might have saved lives.

Talia gave a faltering smile, and asked again, "But seriously, how did you put up that strong a block? I've

never come across anything like that. Even during training with Psi Cops, who were rated as P12's, I never experienced a block that solid."

I preened slightly. Lily would be proud of me.

Fillion shrugged. "It's a talent."

Well, that was true enough.

The Ranger went on, "It's a useful one when dealing with the likes of you. Don't you know it's illegal for teeps to carry out scans without consent? Those are the new rules."

Talia laughed. "Those may be the new rules, but I'm not a new teep, Captain. I'm one of the old school, trained by Psi Corpss, loyal to my kind. The new rules don't apply to me."

What exactly did she mean by that? Loyal to her kind? Loyal to Psi Corpss? Did that mean the remnants of that organization remained somewhere, hidden from Earth and the ISA, ready to emerge again one day? It was a scary thought. Several years before I had encountered Alfred Bester, who epitomized everything the Psi Corpss had stood for. He had saved my life, but I knew it was only because I was a teep. He'd have let a mundane die in the same situation, as he'd made it clear he considered them to be an inferior species, and one day he hoped that telepaths would rule the Earth Alliance. Something gave me the feeling that this woman, Talia, would have felt very comfortable with Bester and his ilk.

Pushing my fears aside for the moment, I listened as Fillion glared at Talia in response to her comment and again appeared prepared to break off negotiations. My admiration for the Ranger went up another notch as I watched Welles step in again, and persuade the apparently reluctant Fillion to carry on with the deal. The Ranger was an outstanding actor. Even his brain patterns remained calm and in control, as I ascertained by the lightest of scans. We'd agreed that I should do this on an intermittent basis, to check that no outside influence was altering his thinking and perceptions.

The negotiations dragged on slowly, during which time I switched air tanks again. I was now on the last one, and I calculated that I had about twenty minutes air supply left. The temptation to send a closely guarded and focused thought into Fillion's mind, telling him to hurry and wrap up the deal, was enormous. I resisted as I didn't want to startle him while he was in the midst of the delicate maneuvering needed to get the Raiders where we wanted them to go. Well, that was one reason. The other was that there was a good chance Talia would detect such a sending.

I concentrated on breathing slow and shallow, hoping to stretch the air for as long as possible. I suddenly realized that the anxiety and fear I was feeling was only a fraction of what Matthew must have suffered, when he had hung alone in space after the destruction of the Cerberus, breathing the last of his oxygen, knowing there was no hope of rescue. I shuddered at the thought, completely understanding my Captain's reluctance to ever go out into space in a suit again.

Fillion, Welles and Talia eventually agreed on their deal, specifying the items to be traded, the price, the location of the moon on which the transfer would take place, and the timing of the assignation.

Then Fillion asked what the Raiders wanted with the goods he was selling.

Talia almost bared her teeth at the question, but Welles placed his hand on her arm, restraining her. "That piece of information wasn't part of the deal, Captain. If you wish to know that, it will cost you."

Welles gave Fillion a condescending smile that made my flesh creep. It was even scarier somehow than Talia's feral snarl.

Fillion shrugged. I had to admire his nonchalance as he said, "Just curious. Not an issue for me. Once the stuff is yours, you can do whatever you want with it, as far as I'm concerned."

As he spoke, Talia launched another mental assault, obviously hoping to catch Fillion off-guard. I'd sensed her build-up of tension, and again had a mental shield around the Ranger, protecting him from her attack. As I bounced her scan, this time I followed it back into her mind. I justified this by telling myself she had twice broken all the rules I'd learned to live by, twice attempted to do serious damage to a defenseless victim.

I couldn't probe deeply without alerting her, but in the jumble of her mind I picked up a couple of impressions. First and foremost was the Psi character that symbolized telepaths to the universe. It was the symbol I had worn for years, even on my Earthforce uniform, before my Captain and friend had freed me from the tyranny of the Joneses. That symbol overlaid all Talia's thoughts and feelings. It was almost as if it had somehow been branded into her consciousness.

The second impression was puzzling. Talia's mind carried an odd echo. It was like a second layer, a second person, buried beneath the hard outer coating of her dominant personality.

Once during my Psi Corps training I had been taken to the hospital in Geneva where those teeps who had broken under the strain of their talent were housed. Those poor people whose minds had been unable to cope with the constant noise every teep had to endure, were held securely, shielded as much as possible from the outer world. The psychoses those people suffered had varied widely, but in some cases, the mental breakdown was evidenced by the emergence of multiple personalities. Talia's mind reminded me of those sad cases.

Two distinct people seemed to live inside her brain. The harsh, vicious, dominant personality overlaid another: softer, gentler, kinder, much less assertive. I wondered if this other Talia ever emerged to gain control of the body. When the dominant Talia slept, did the weaker Talia take control? Did the dominant Talia even know about her weaker sister?

It was a mystery I knew I'd probably never solve, and I had more urgent matters to worry about. My air supply was exhausted.

I was hugely relieved to hear Fillion saying goodbye to the others, and to see them turning to leave. As they disappeared into the darkness, Fillion waited for a few moments, then his image vanished from the screen as he left the area covered by the hidden camera.

A few seconds later light flooded into my crate as the lid was lifted. I tore the empty breather off my face and gulped in huge drafts of air, not caring about the foul smell that permeated Downbelow. Fillion grinned and extended his arm to help me straighten and climb out of the crate. My legs would hardly hold me up, and they went into spasms of cramp as I tried to stand unaided. I was still gasping for air, and the hypoxia I was suffering left me seeing little flashes of light all around me.

Fillion kept his arm around my waist and moved me into the corridor, lowering me gently to the floor. I stretched my cramping legs out in front of me, and the Ranger immediately started massaging the frozen muscles, quickly easing the pain. He had strong hands, and seemed to sense exactly where the knots were worst.

After a few moments the cramp eased, and the stars that circled my head slowed in their whirling. I grimaced at Fillion, croaking a grateful, "Thanks," out of a throat ravaged by oxygen deprivation.

The Ranger grinned at me, not stopping his massage as he said, "I owe you. You blocked her attacks beautifully, but there was still enough strength left for me to feel them. If you hadn't been here, my brain would be fried. To quote an old 20th century movie, I'm rather fond of my brain. It's my second favorite organ'."

I started to laugh, which hurt my sore throat, but it felt good anyway. Fillion started to chuckle too, and that's how Chief Allan and his people found us: both sitting with our backs against the wall of a filthy corridor in Downbelow, with a bad case of the giggles.

I think Zack Allan now has a lower opinion of me than he does of Matthew, and that's saying something.

Angel

When the call eventually came through, it wasn't from the person I expected. As soon as I heard the signal, I lunged at the viewscreen, then tried to hide my disappointment as the screen lit up with the image of Sangeetha Siddhartha, the Excalibur's communication officer.

Sangeetha obviously wasn't fooled, as she gave me a little grin and a wink. "Sorry I'm not who you were expecting to hear from, Angel, but I think the message I have will cheer you up."

I grinned back apologetically. Sangeetha and I were good friends, and we'd often compared notes in the mess-hall on who we found attractive and who we didn't. We rarely agreed, as she generally preferred females, and my preferences were all very much male, but it was still fun to compare. The little Asian officer had a wicked sense of humor, and wonderful taste in clothes and jewelry. She had sometimes loaned me things to wear at receptions we'd held on board the Excalibur, and she had once given me one of her saris; a beautiful red silk creation that I had admired.

Matthew's eyes had nearly stood out on stalks when I'd worn that outfit.

"The Captain just called. He's on his way back over from B5, with Ranger Cole, and General Lochley. He gave orders to have a handling crew ready in the landing bay, as they're bringing a delicate cargo back with them."

I puzzled over her words for a moment, then widened my eyes as I caught her meaning. "John? Are they bringing John back that way again? Lily will kill them!" Demon had called me from her quarters after she'd put Marcus to bed, and told me all about Matthew's earlier encounter with Lily. I'd nearly wet myself laughing, but agreed that if ever Lily tried to shave Matthew's head, I'd help Demon scalp the little witch!

Sangeetha laughed and nodded. "Yes, the Commander is traveling cargo class again, but that's not why I called. I believe he has a traveling companion. One you'd like to meet again."

My grin went from ear to ear and I started to bounce in my seat. Just the thought of being with Mal again made my nipples stand out, and created a wave of hot wetness deep inside me. Sangeetha obviously

noticed my excitement as she started to laugh at me, saying, "Get your butt down to landing bay, Angel, they'll be arriving in about ten minutes. Just time to touch up your make-up. Not that you need it."

She looked at me admiringly, and winked again. I knew Sangeetha found me attractive, but we never let it interfere with our friendship. I smiled and blew a kiss at the screen. "Bless you. I'm on my way."

Just as Sangeetha leaned forward to cut the link, a thought occurred to me, and I held my hand up, making her pause. "Did the Captain tell you to call me?"

The Asian officer laughed. "Him? Not a chance. He just asked me to let Demon know he's on his way back, and he told me to get Dr. Raven down to the landing bay. But when he asked for the cargo handling crew and mentioned the crate would contain two live specimens for Medbay, I put two and two together, and thought you'd like to know. Just don't tell him it was me who tipped you off."

*With one last wink, Sangeetha cut the connection and left me to my excitement. My cowboy was coming to visit, and that mean we'd *both* be coming soon.*

Gideon

As I trotted down the ramp from the shuttle into the Excalibur's landing bay, I suppressed a yawn. It was just after midnight, ship's time, and it had been a very long day. I'd been thankful when the signal came through to Ben Marriot's office from Zack Allen, telling us that Fillion and John were both safe, but the release of tension at that point had left me feeling exhausted. All I really wanted to do at that moment was to head for my quarters and climb into bed with my wife.

No such luck. Before I could even think about what I might like to do with Deborah when I got home, I had another meeting to face, this time in Medbay, where we planned to move John and Fillion immediately we opened the crate in which they'd been transported back to the Excalibur. I tried not to think about how Lily would react when she found out that John had come back to the ship in a box again.

I realized that I would soon find out, as the doors to the landing bay opened and Luke Raven walked through, with his fiery red-headed wife on his arm, almost tripping over her long, green dress in her eagerness to get to the shuttle. They were followed by two of Luke's Medbay team, carrying a stretcher, obviously intended for John. If looks could have killed, the glare Lily gave me as she approached would have dropped me on the spot.

Perfect.

I'd called ahead to get Raven to meet the shuttle when I'd seen how John looked when we'd put him back in the crate. The poor bastard's legs were cramping from all the time he'd spent doubled over. Even though we'd put him and Fillion in the biggest box we could fit into the shuttle, I knew John would be even worse by the time we were able to unpack him on the Excalibur, so I wanted Raven to carry out a full physical on my XO. I wished there had been another way to conceal the to-ing and fro-ing between B5 and my ship, but putting John and Fillion in a crate, and pretending this was just a normal supply run, had been the only way to keep anyone finding out what we were up to.

As if Lily's presence weren't enough, my night was made complete when I saw Angel entering the landing bay hot on Lily's heels. My sister-in-law had obviously found out that Fillion was on his way over, and was ready to give him her own variation on a full physical.

Marcus Cole and Liz Lochley were right behind me on the shuttle ramp, so I bit my lip and kept my thoughts about Angel and Fillion's activities tightly buttoned down. Somehow I think my expression must have given away my displeasure, as Angel looked up at me with her chin lifted defiantly and her blue eyes flashing. The combination of her insubordination and her excitement--her nipples were standing out under her sweater like tent pegs--threatened to send a surge of blood to a part of my anatomy that I really didn't need aroused at that point.

Keeping my thoughts firmly fixed on icebergs, I waved Raven over to the cargo hold of the shuttle, where two crewmen were dragging out a large crate. As they popped the lid, Fillion emerged suddenly, looking for all the world like a Jack-in-a-box toy. Angel let out a little scream of pleasure and flung herself across the landing bay, sliding to a halt as Fillion held up his hand.

"Whoa there, girl. Just hold your horses until I help John out of here."

Raven and Lily had arrived at the crate, and Lily let out a little whimper of dismay as she stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over the edge. She wasn't quite tall enough, so she began to demand--loudly--that someone lift her up so she could see if John was all right.

Fillion ducked down again, and by this time I had joined the crowd around the box, all peering in at my poor XO, who was doubled up in the bottom. Fillion was trying to help him, but John couldn't seem to straighten his legs and stand.

Before I could open my mouth to give an order, I was over-ridden from an unexpected direction. Angel's voice was almost commanding as she said, "Stand back. I can take care of this."

I turned to see her standing on her toes, just tall enough to see into the box. She closed her eyes, biting her lip as she concentrated. To everyone's amazement--including John's, as he let out a startled yelp--my XO, henceforth known as John-in-a-box Matheson, started to lift from the bottom of the crate, floating up and over the edge.

I watched as a sheen of sweat broke out on Angel's forehead. It didn't really surprise me, as I'd never seen her try to lift anything as heavy as John before. The previous year, Angel had severely strained her telekinetic abilities while restraining her nephew, Vya, when his body had been taken over by a malign alien entity. I hadn't seen Angel use her powers since then, but she'd obviously recovered their full use, and then some.

What really surprised me was her willingness to demonstrate her abilities in front of Fillion, and his apparently calm acceptance of those powers. Either he already knew about Angel's capabilities, or he had one of the nest poker faces I had ever seen. Whichever was correct, it was obvious that Angel trusted this man implicitly.

John was wafted over to the waiting stretcher and lowered gently onto it, while Lily and Raven rushed to his side. As Angel released him, she opened her eyes and wobbled a little. I rushed toward her, but Marcus Cole got there ahead of me, supporting her as she wavered. Fillion leaped out of the crate in one athletic bound and quickly shouldered Marcus aside, sweeping Angel up into his arms. I gritted my teeth again, not exactly enjoying the way Angel looked up at the Ranger as she put her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder.

Fillion turned and looked at me, saying, "Would you mind if I took Angel to her quarters before the

de-briefing, Captain?"

I suspected that as soon as he got Angel into a private place, some form of physical de-briefing would happen very quickly indeed, just not the verbal kind I wanted. Before I could answer, Luke Raven looked up from where he and Lily had been crouched over John.

"Captain, I would recommend that any further discussions are postponed until the morning. John needs recovery time, and I'm sure the rest of you would benefit from a good night's sleep, too."

I had to agree, as I was struggling to keep myself from yawning again.

It didn't take long to arrive at a decision. Marcus would stay on board the Excalibur in guest quarters, while Lochley returned to B5 to brief Ben Marriot and send an update to Sheridan. She would rejoin us in the morning, bringing Zack Allen with her. Luke and Lily would take John back to their quarters, after a stop off in Medbay to pick up their children from the crèche and to give John a proper examination. Fillion would stop with Angel for the night, while I returned to my own quarters.

I can't say I was happy about the last part, but Marcus Cole was watching me carefully, and I think he'd realized how conflicted I was. [Conflicted. That's a good word, Matt. How about jealous? That's a good word, too.]

The last thing I needed was that Ranger teasing me about my feelings for Angel, so I did my best to appear happy with the overall plan. "We'll meet in the conference room at 07:00 sharp. Dismissed."

Fillion carried Angel out of the landing bay, quickly followed by Raven, Lily and the two crewmembers carrying John's stretcher. Marcus hung back a little, while I called the bridge and asked them to send down someone to escort our visitor to guest quarters.

The two of us left the landing bay together, allowing Lochley to get back onto the shuttle, ready for departure for B5. As we waited in silence outside the flight deck for Marcus' escort, we watched as the shuttle lifted and exited the Excalibur. Keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the departing ship, Marcus murmured, "I had no idea that Angel's powers had grown so strong."

I turned to look at him, lifting an eyebrow as I said, "And I had no idea you knew about her powers." I started to walk toward the doors of the bullet car tube down the corridor.

Marcus followed, grinning at me as he said, "She used them when we escaped from those ruffians on B5. She made me promise not to talk about it."

I nodded my understanding. At that moment, the doors opened and Lieutenant Siddhartha emerged, smiling at Marcus as she told him that she was his escort. I followed them onto the bullet car, and sat down wearily. I was trying hard not to think about what Angel and Fillion were doing, but it wasn't really working, and I could feel myself becoming aroused as the vibrations of the bullet car combined with my wandering thoughts to produce the inevitable effect. I may have been tired, but one part of me was raring to go.

I crossed my legs, angling myself away from Marcus and Siddhartha, who sat chatting merrily as we traveled. When the car arrived at my stop, I stood, again careful to keep my back to the others. I turned to look over my shoulder, wishing Marcus a good night, and started to leave the bullet car.

Just as the doors were closing behind me, I heard Marcus say, "Goodnight, Captain. Don't worry about Angel. I'm sure she's quite safe in Fillion's hands. Try not to let thoughts about them keep you 'up'."

One of these days I'm going to strangle that Ranger. I don't care if Susan Ivanova tries to kill me. Deborah will defend me.

*I gritted my teeth and limped down the corridor to my quarters, hoping my wife was awake and in the mood for a little lechery. [Pretty stupid, Matt. Deborah is *always* in a lecherous mood.]*

I smiled as I entered our rooms and headed for the bedroom. I had six and a half hours before I had to be back on duty, and I didn't have to spend all of that time sleeping. Maybe I could even persuade Deborah to model some of her new lingerie.

{Chapter 1} {Chapter 2} {Epilogue}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four R

{Part 1: These Sheltering Arms} {Part 2: The Last Battle}