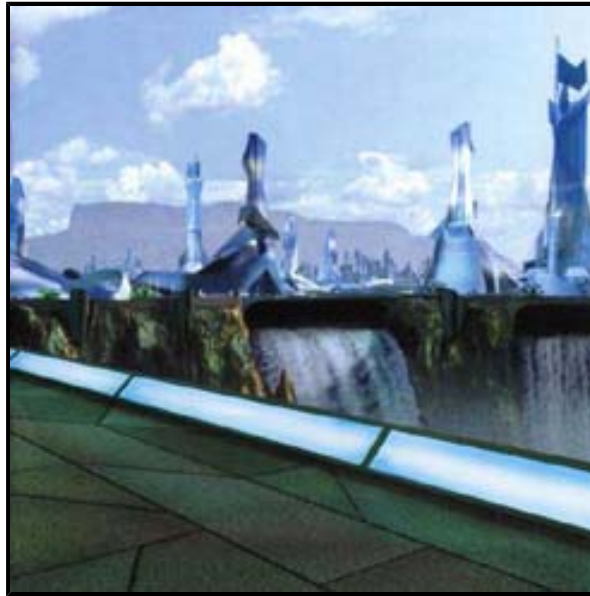


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four T - Part 2: Avalon

by *The Space Witches*



Tuzanor, the Minbari capital

Chapter 3

17th July 2273

Gideon stood on the balcony, looking out at the crystalline towers and thundering waterfalls of Tuzanor, waiting for President Sheridan to join him. The Captain was pleased that the weather allowed them to hold their meeting outside. The opportunities for a starship Captain to get outdoors and breathe fresh air were few and far between. [Although all that will change soon enough,] Gideon thought, pondering the total change of lifestyle that lay ahead of him.

The thought of living in a house, on a planet, with a beach outside and fresh air all around, was slightly disconcerting. [And I'm still not sure what I'm going to do with myself all day.] The Captain's lips curved into a smile as he thought that finding something to fill his nights would be less problematic. The prospect of going to bed with his wife every night--with no greater risk of being disturbed than their four year old son having a bad dream--was extremely appealing.

The sound of movement behind him made Gideon turn. Sheridan emerged onto the balcony, followed by a religious caste Minbari, who carried a tray with a jug, glasses, and plates of something that the Captain presumed would be edible. With the Minbari, you could never quite be sure. It could just as easily be something over which he was supposed to meditate. Gideon decided to wait and see if Sheridan ate it or bowed to it. Better safe than sorry.

Sheridan smiled as he walked onto the balcony and held out his hand. Gideon took it, while noting that the President looked even older and wearier than when they'd last met, after the mission to Centauri Prime. After an exchange of courtesies, during which the Minbari silently placed the tray on a low table, bowed, and left, Sheridan waved Gideon to a seat. Pouring drinks for them both, the President said, "You look pretty good for a man who was declared dead."

Gideon smiled, quoting, "The report of my death has been greatly exaggerated."

Sheridan laughed, "I've always loved Twain. A maxim for everything." Passing the drink to Gideon, the President then lifted the plate and offered it. The Captain stared at it with narrowed eyes.

"If I eat that, am I going to enjoy it, regret it, or cause a diplomatic incident?" The Captain removed a small, blue, egg shaped object from the plate and examined it carefully.

Sheridan smiled and popped a similar object into his mouth, chewed a couple of times, then swallowed. "Well, I like them. They taste like chicken."

*Gideon laughed aloud, then put the morsel in his mouth. It *did* taste like chicken. Rubbery chicken. He chewed carefully as Sheridan continued, "Your final mission was an interesting one, Captain. Your report was, as usual, intriguing. As much for what it didn't say as for what it did. Do you want to give me a verbal report on what was *really* going on down there?"*

The Captain nodded. "Most of this is speculation, but I think any guesses are educated. What you have on Inesbitrin is a microcosm of the previous Shadow War. A thousand years ago, the Vorlons and the Shadows used that planet as a battleground. I'd guess that both sides wanted the mineral wealth. It looks like the Vorlons used their normal trick of masquerading as 'angels', or beings of light. They made the inhabitants into converts, worshiping the Vorlons and doing their bidding. To be fair, it appears that if the Vorlons hadn't rescued the remaining inhabitants after the Shadows attacked, changing them genetically to tolerate the new climate, all life on Inesbitrin would have been destroyed. The Vorlons won that round, leaving their people in control, and some of their

technology in place."

He went on to describe the Triluminary that Deborah had seen. Sheridan nodded, obviously familiar with the device, which was interesting. Gideon wondered where Sheridan might have come across such a thing.

Gideon went on, "I would also guess that after the last Shadow War ended, and the Shadows retreated, the Drakh kept on mining Inesbitrin, staying well away from the main settlements, keeping a low profile. When the rebels found them around forty years ago, the Drakh decided not to kill them, but to use the labor force they provided. They kept the rebels supplied with food and arms, taking the minerals in exchange. Then we came along and disturbed the status quo."

Sheridan leaned back in his chair, mulling over the story Gideon had just told him, then nodding. "It makes sense. It seems that even having gotten rid of the First Ones we're still having to clean up the messes they've left behind." The President sat silently for a while, brooding. Gideon wondered what he was thinking about, but waited patiently for Sheridan to bring himself back to the present.

After a long pause, Sheridan shook himself. "Well, that's history. I've had reports from the White Star fleet that they've taken up position around the planet. So far, there have been no further Drakh incursions. The priestesses' representatives are on their way to look at their new home, and the evacuation fleet is being organized. We'll do our best to get messages to the rebels, too, offering to relocate them. It'll be up to them to decide if they want to accept. Whichever way they go, we'll have to mine the place with one eye out for attacks from the Drakh, but overall, the amount of Quantum 40 we can take out should make it worthwhile." He looked up at Gideon and smiled. "Another mission successfully completed, Captain."

Gideon smiled back. "Always good to end on a high. The priestesses still have a way to go before they give full equality to the males of their species, but I think we've given them enough incentive that they'll get there." He suppressed a smile as he remembered one of the incentives he'd given them. Sheridan didn't need to know about that.

"So what next? What are your plans for retirement?" Sheridan's question roused Gideon from his reverie. It was a good question. Gideon wasn't sure he had a good answer.

"My first priority is to get my family settled into our new home. One of our new homes." Gideon grinned as he told Sheridan what he'd only found out himself a

couple of days before.

When his back pay had come through three years before, Gideon had dumped the whole amount into a bank account, and with the exception of one or two extravagancies like the purchase of the motorbike, he had then been forced to decide what to do with it. He and Deborah had disagreed on the best investments. Gideon had favored equities, saying the Earth stock market was rising after the cure to the Drakh plague had been found. Deborah had wanted to invest in property, saying that prices were at an all time low on Earth.

Unable to reach agreement, they'd finally agreed to split their available credits between them, and see whose investment strategy paid off. The deal had been that when Gideon retired, they would compare assets and the winner would... Gideon decided Sheridan didn't need to know what the prize was. It was enough that it was something both the Captain and his wife would enjoy, but the winner would it enjoy most.

*With retirement imminent, Gideon had decided it was time to check on his resources. He carefully totaled the credits he'd acquired from his investments and looked forward to showing Deborah how successful his acquisitions had been. Then Deborah had shown him what she'd be doing with her half of the credits. She had quietly built up a portfolio of property that astounded him. He'd joked often enough in the past about having a rich wife. He'd discovered that night that he didn't *need* a rich wife. His wife had been busy making him equally rich.*

"It turns out that we now own a beach house in Santa Monica, a villa on Malta, a town house in Cape Town, a condo in New York, and another large house overlooking Sydney Harbor. Deborah has rented them all out, except the one in Santa Monica. The rental income should help pay for the renovation of a huge, dilapidated 19th century pile in England, which Deborah has bought, and where she'd like us to live in the long term. We're moving into the beach house at first, then we'll see how the restoration on the English place goes." Gideon shook his head, still hardly able to believe what Deborah had built up over the past three years. But he'd enjoyed losing the bet for once. He'd enjoyed it very much indeed.

Sheridan laughed and pulled a piece of plasfilm out of the file he'd brought with him onto the balcony. "Then it hardly seems worth giving you this. Take it as a gesture, anyway."

Gideon took the plasfilm and looked at it, then looked up at the President in question. The document was written in Minbari, which Gideon had never learned to read, although he could speak the main religious and warrior dialects.

"It's a pension from the ISA. A sign of our appreciation for the work you've done while reporting to us. I know that Earthforce will be giving you a pension, but I also know from personal experience that those pensions aren't generous. If you don't need the credits, donate it to a charity of your choice."

Gideon was speechless. He hadn't expected such a gesture from the ISA. Earthforce had paid him during his secondment, and for him that had been sufficient. When he found his voice, he stuttered some form of thanks, unable to coherently describe how much the gesture meant to him.

Sheridan smiled, saying, "I have something else for you. By rights, this should be given to you at a grand ceremony, with every member of the ISA council present, and you in full dress uniform." Gideon groaned at the prospect, and Sheridan laughed as he went on, "But I know how much you hate dress uniform, and I know you specifically asked for no ceremonies to mark your retirement. So I'm just going to give this to you. The informality of the presentation in no way diminishes the importance of the award, nor of the appreciation it represents. You've done a great job for the ISA, Captain, and we're grateful."

The President held out a small box, which Gideon took, opening it carefully. Inside was a medal, unlike any the Captain had seen before. It was also inscribed with Minbari writing, and he looked up quizzically at Sheridan, working hard at concealing the emotion he felt.

"It's the Minbari Warrior equivalent of the Medal of Honor. It's awarded for meritorious service beyond all expectations. The Minbari have very high expectations, so very few of these are given out. By saving ten billion lives on Earth, and all the service you've given since, even the Minbari Warrior caste agreed that you'd earned this award. Take it, with the best wishes and gratitude of Minbar and the whole of the ISA."

If Gideon had been speechless before, he was doubly so now. He swallowed several times, fighting down the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. Part of him wanted to tell Sheridan that he didn't deserve this. That it was his crew who deserved the honors, not him. How could he accept this, when so many had lost their lives under his leadership? As he looked at the medal, the names and faces of every crewman who'd died serving on the Excalibur scrolled through his mind. After a long moment of silence, Gideon found the words he needed.

"Thank you, Mr. President. I accept this on behalf of the crew of the Excalibur, those alive today, and those who lost their lives in service. They deserve it." He looked up to see that Sheridan's eyes were shining, and he knew that the President understood. Sheridan had lost men in battle, and knew the cost of

command.

They shared a look, full of pain and understanding, then Gideon rose to his feet, saluting. "It's been a pleasure working for you, Mr. President. I can never thank you enough for giving me the opportunity to command the Excalibur, first for Earthforce, then for you. The only question now, is who will be taking over from me?"

Sheridan slowly rose to join him, and Gideon had to restrain himself from offering a helping hand. It was hard to believe that Sheridan was less than ten years older than Gideon. The President sighed. "If you'd asked me that question a month ago, I'd have said it was a foregone conclusion. Commander Matheson was a shoe-in for the position. His service had been exemplary, and your recommendation carries a lot of weight. The fact that he's a telepath caused some of the ISA council members concern, but on the whole, it worked to his advantage. Many members wanted to make a statement that telepaths are considered equal members of our society, and appointing Commander Matheson as Captain of the Excalibur would have been a powerful way of making that statement. Even without that factor, John Matheson was by far the outstanding candidate for the job, but now..." Sheridan trailed off, turning to face the view over the city.

Gideon waited for a few moments, listening to the distant thunder of the waterfalls, before moving to the President's side, joining him in staring out at the view. Eventually, the Captain could stand the wait no longer, and he broke the silence. "Now? Now what?"

Sheridan turned and shook his head. "Now it's more difficult. Commander Matheson disobeyed a direct order from my office. He refused to leave Inesbitrin when he was ordered. He refused to leave you behind. That's a breach of discipline we can't ignore."

Gideon's stomach sank.

23rd July 2273

Demon looked around her quarters with a mixture of satisfaction and dismay. The satisfaction came from the order she had finally managed to restore to her rooms, after days of living in chaos amongst half packed boxes, piles of books and possessions which needed sorting before packing. The dismay arose from how bare and impersonal her rooms now looked. She had lived there for nearly

four years, so moving out was a wrench. [No worse than leaving Eriadne, and at least this time, you can look forward to having more space, not less,] Demon told herself briskly, refusing to be depressed by the bland surroundings. [And tomorrow...]

It was hard to suppress her excitement at the prospect of finally arriving at Earth, ready to disembark and start a new life. It was also hard to suppress her apprehension about leaving one of her sisters, and about how that new life would work out. At times she felt as if she were the only person looking forward to any part of the change.

Demon knew that her husband was uncomfortable about what the future might hold for him. He had instigated the move, and he had repeatedly assured her that this was something he wanted to do; especially now their new baby was on the way. The tall blonde looked down and gently touched her still flat stomach, smiling as she remembered Matthew's happiness at the knowledge that he was going to be a father again, and this time to a little girl. Their family and friends on board the Excalibur had shared that sentiment, and in the last few days, it had been one of the few bright spots. Despite his happiness, Demon knew that Matthew was worried. For the past twenty-five years, Earthforce had filled his life, and he wasn't sure what he was going to do with himself in retirement.

Angel was as apprehensive about the future as Matthew. She had an appointment with an agent in a week and a screen test a few days later. While the prospect of a new career was exciting, it was also daunting. Demon knew that Angel felt as if her recent life had been like a rollercoaster. Her younger sister wanted a period of calm and stability to recover from the distress of meeting, then losing, Jack Gideon, followed by the ordeal of thinking they had lost Matthew. Both Demon and Lily had spent long hours with their sister, comforting and reassuring her, but Angel was still fragile, and wary of everything that leaving the Excalibur entailed.

Marcus wasn't just wary. He was scared. Demon sighed as she moved into the kitchen area, pulling food from the refrigerator in preparation for the evening meal they planned to share with Lily, John, Luke and Angel. The last meal they would have together on the Excalibur. Demon pulled her thoughts back to Marcus. Her son had made his displeasure at the move very clear to everyone. He was desperately unhappy at having to leave his cousins behind. Even the fact that his father would be with them every day was hardly enough to make up for the absence of Dasha, Faylinn and Naima. Demon smiled sadly as she remembered her son admitting that he would even miss the girls. Marcus' only comfort in recent days had been Half-Ted, who had been his constant

companion, despite having lost his sole remaining ear on the night Matthew and Demon had returned from Inesbitrin to the Excalibur. The memory of the trauma this had caused left Demon torn between laughter and tears.

Thinking of Marcus' cousins inevitably led Demon's thoughts to their parents, all of whom were concerned for the future. Luke was worried about his family, his children and about Angel. The ship's doctor and Demon's younger sister were close friends as well as colleagues, and Demon knew that Angel had confided her fears in Luke more than anyone else. That had just added to Luke's worries, which were mainly focused on John and Lily.

John was hiding his concerns well, but they all knew the wait for confirmation of the new commander of the Excalibur was causing him great stress. Matthew had expected to receive news of President Sheridan's decision every day since leaving Minbar, but he'd heard nothing. The strain of the wait was getting to everyone, crew included, but John bore the largest burden of worry. The decision could affect whether he stayed in Earthforce or was forced to resign, giving up on his dream of command. Nevertheless, John had continued to carry out his duties, efficient as always, not allowing anyone outside his family to see the anxiety he was suffering.

Lily was worried about John, worried about Angel, and worried about how her sisters' departure would affect them all. The links between the sisters had diminished over the previous few months, but they were all apprehensive about how the final separation would affect them.

Given what she was, Demon couldn't help worrying about everyone, despite her own excitement about meeting her publisher at last, and the imminent publication of her first novel. She worried about her husband, her son, her sisters, and her friends. She worried about them all.

Just once, she had asked Matthew whether their move to Earth was worth the pain it was causing. Fortunately, Marcus had already been asleep, as the ensuing argument had been brief but intense, probably not helped by the hormones surging through Demon's body, making her irritable and short-tempered.

Matthew had retreated to his old quarters, claiming he had work to do, and Demon had gone to bed in tears. Her husband had joined her later, taking her into his arms, kissing her forehead, and whispering his apology for his outburst. She had apologized in turn and their subsequent lovemaking had been tender and conciliatory, but Demon had not risked raising the issue again. It was too late, anyway. Matthew had resigned and they all had to live with the consequences.

Completing the preparations for dinner, Demon washed her hands and moved toward her son's bedroom, to wake him from his afternoon nap.

The beep in John's ear-piece was followed by a subdued voice saying, "Will you come through to my office, John? Thank you." The link went dead, and Commander Matheson stood abruptly. He knew that Gideon had received a call from the President's office a few moments earlier. If Matthew wanted to talk in private, so soon before they were both due to go off duty, it could only mean...John stopped himself. [You don't know what it might mean. It could mean anything. It could be good news, bad news, or it could just mean he's bored. Stop winding yourself up.]

Straightening his jacket, John left the bridge, giving a quiet order to Lieutenant Siddhartha to take command. The look Sangeetha gave him as he departed was full of sympathetic concern.

The week since leaving Minbar had been hell for John, but he'd done his best not to let his anxieties affect his performance in any way. Only Luke and Lily had seen how much the delay in declaring the new Captain had concerned John. They'd all expected the announcement to be made before they left Minbar, but Matthew had come back from his meeting with Sheridan with no news to report.

John knew that his decision to stay in orbit of Inesbitrin, in defiance of his orders from the President's office, might have cost him his career and his future. He also knew he'd done the right thing, made the right decision, as leaving sooner could have cost Matthew his life. John's career in Earthforce was a small price to pay when weighed against his friend's life. Now the waiting was over. Now it was time to find out the penalty for his disobedience.

Arriving at the Captain's office, John pressed the signal and waited until the doors opened. Matthew was sitting behind his desk, head down, hands clasped in front of him on a completely bare surface. He looked up as John entered and smiled. [Is that a happy smile or a sad smile? Is it the sort of smile he gives when he's about to break bad news, or when he's trying to hide how pleased he is?]

Matheson had become familiar with every expression of Gideon's face during the years they'd served together, but all his knowledge of his Captain deserted him in that moment. The temptation to do a quick scan, picking up on Gideon's underlying emotions, was almost irresistible, but John controlled himself sternly. He would just have to wait, like any other member of the crew, for the Captain to get around to telling him what was on his mind.

Matthew waved John into the seat opposite, and said abruptly, "I just got a call from President Sheridan's office."

John just stopped himself from screaming, 'I know you did, you idiot! Who do you think put the damned call through to you?!' He smiled and nodded, wishing that his Captain would get on with it.

Gideon dropped his eyes, staring at his clasped hands as he continued, "I've been given orders to confirm our arrival in Earth orbit with Sheridan's office, then hand over to the new commander."

[He's doing it on purpose. He's dragging it out deliberately. But is that because he's teasing me? Or because he hates giving me the bad news? For God's sake, Matthew, just tell me!] John didn't allow those thoughts to show in his face. He just continued to look at his Captain, only allowing his expression to display mild interest.

He watched as Matthew continued to stare at his clasped hands on the desk in front of him. The Captain's face remained expressionless as he went on, "In the light of recent events, the President's decision as to who will replace me is in some ways surprising. In other ways, it could be seen as predictable."

[Matthew, if you don't spit it out, I'm going to lean across that desk, grab you by the belt and pull up hard, until you're standing on tip toe, and your voice hits top C. And I don't care if Demon comes after me. She doesn't scare me any more!] John's jaw clenched and he only kept the words inside--and his hands still--by sheer force of will power.

"Commander Matheson. I have to advise you that the new Captain of the Excalibur--who will be taking over command from me on our arrival in Earth orbit--will be..." The subsequent pause was long enough to allow John to die a hundred times over, and to plan a thousand different ways of killing his Captain, every one slow and painful. Then Gideon looked up, and couldn't quite conceal the sparkle that glinted in his hazel eyes, as he completed the sentence with a single word. "You."

John closed his eyes and sent silent thanks to the universe. It took everything he'd ever learned about control to stop himself from flinging himself across the desk at Matthew. He wasn't quite sure if he wanted to hug or strangle his Captain, but he knew he'd better not do either. After a few moments of concentration, John opened his eyes and smiled gently at the man opposite, saying quietly, "Thank you, Captain. I wasn't sure..."

Before John could continue, Matthew threw himself out of his chair and around the desk. He yanked John upright, then gave him a bear hug, slapping him on the back until he coughed, laughing and yelling, "For once in your life let it go and don't worry about the consequences! Don't be such a control freak!"

While images of pots and kettles flitted through John's mind, he followed Matthew's order and relaxed. A wave of happiness, relief, gratitude, apprehension, fear, but overall, sheer joy, swept through the room and out into the ship.

Gideon laughed. "Whoa! That one was worthy of Deborah! I never knew you could project emotions as strongly as she can."

John gave him a sheepish grin. "I never let myself go like that before, so I didn't know either. Sorry!"

The Captain laughed again. "Don't be. It saves me having to make an announcement. I doubt if there's anyone on the ship who can't guess who their new Captain is now." Gideon straightened up, and saluted John smartly. It wasn't one of his usual sloppy gestures, but a crisp, military salute, the like of which John had never seen his Captain give before. "Congratulations, Captain Matheson. I don't know anyone who deserves it more."

John returned the salute, trying to think of words adequate to express his gratitude to the man in front of him. Matthew Gideon had been his friend and mentor throughout his career. Without Matthew, John knew he would never have had that career, and would certainly never have achieved command of any ship, never mind the flagship of the ISA. Now he could live with his family, with his partners and children, while still doing the job he loved most. There was no way he could ever put into words how much he felt he owed Matthew.

Matheson opened his mouth to speak, but no sound emerged. The intensity of his feelings had robbed him of speech. He sent a single word directly into Matthew's mind, for the moment abandoning all protocols. [/Why?/]

Gideon smiled and shook his head. "Because you're the best man for the job. You have the best experience, the best attitude, and you have an advantage. You're a telepath, John. Some people consider that a positive, not a negative. Sheridan wants you to use all your abilities, your skills and your knowledge to lead this ship and the people on it. Don't handicap yourself."

John's eyes widened in surprise. He started to stutter, "But the rules..."

Gideon interrupted. "Don't apply to you anymore, John. You make your own rules. Sheridan trusts your discretion, just as I've always done, to use your abilities wisely. He and I both know that you would never abuse your powers. Don't operate with one hand tied behind your back. Use everything available to get the job done. I always have; so should you. Anything less would be a betrayal of the man who is putting his trust in you by giving you this job, a betrayal of the people serving under you and a betrayal of yourself." The Captain moved back around his desk and sat, waving John into a seat as he continued.

"John, this is the toughest job you'll ever be asked to do. Do it with your whole heart and mind, including that special part of your mind, or don't do it at all. Put the past behind you. Forget what Psi Corps and the Bureau of Telepath Integration told you. Use every power you have to protect your people and complete your mission. You'll know when it's right to use your abilities, and when it's wrong. Trust your conscience, John. I do. Sheridan does."

Matheson looked across the table in astounded silence. He asked himself whether he could do what Gideon and Sheridan were asking of him. Could he put the rules and regulations behind him, and allow himself to be guided solely by his own conscience? He smiled as he realized that he didn't have to let his conscience be his only guide. He would always have Lily and Luke beside him, willing to listen, willing to guide and advise when he needed it, ready to defend and support him in every decision. He was no longer alone.

Looking at the man across the table, John knew that from the day he'd arrived on the EAS Phoenix he'd never been truly alone. Gideon had always been there for him, had always been his friend. Matthew's own sense of right and wrong may have been eccentric at times, but it had always been consistent in one respect. He had always been there for his crew, always looked after them, while ensuring their missions succeeded. It was a good role model to emulate.

Reaching a decision, John straightened in his chair, saying softly. "Thank you, Captain. I promise that I will use whatever powers I possess to ensure the safety of this ship, her crew, and our mission, as long as I can act in good conscience." He watched as Matthew's mouth quirked into an ironic smile.

"We all have to answer to our conscience, John. I know yours is a good one. Now get out of here and go celebrate with your family. You may have let the cat out of the bag, but I still have some announcements to make."

John stood and saluted again, then left the Captain's office at a run, barely able to contain his joy, and desperate to share it with his family.

24th July 2273

Gideon sat turning over a data crystal between his fingers. It held his command codes and his final message to John, and handing it to his successor would be his last act as Captain of the Excalibur. [The last thing I'll do as any kind of Captain.]

The thought reminded him of the promotion he'd recently turned down. Earthforce had wanted to make him a General on his retirement, but Gideon had refused. All he'd ever wanted to be was a Captain. Giving him an honorary retirement rank was pointless, as he'd never use it anyway. He despised ex-military officers who insisted on using their rank after they'd retired. So why should he want to become a General now? He'd never respected ranks anyway, only people.

Gideon leaned back in his office chair and sighed softly. Was he really doing the right thing? When he'd told Earthforce and Sheridan that he wanted to retire after twenty-five years service, as was his right, he'd been so sure. Where had all that certainty gone?

The Captain kept his eyes closed as he thought about the future. In a couple of hours he'd be contacted by the bridge, telling him they were ready to jump into Earth orbit. Then he'd gather his family and senior crew in the landing bay, to hand over command to the newly promoted Captain Matheson. Thinking of that name made Gideon's mouth curl into a smile. It sounded good. Captain John Matheson.

Gideon remembered the day he'd first set eyes on John, then a young, painfully correct Ensign, on his very first mission. No one else had wanted the teep freak under their command. Earthforce had tried to post him to several ships, but their Captains had all refused to take John, saying he would be damaging to their crew morale. Memories of the Telepath War had been too fresh at that time. Gideon had only heard about John by accident, when playing poker with Andy Mankowsky, at that time newly appointed as Captain of the Furies. Andy had told Gideon how Earthforce had tried to foist this new telepath on him, but he'd turned them down flat. The next morning, Gideon had put a call into Earthforce and requested that John Matheson be assigned to his command.

Looking back, Gideon sometimes wondered why he'd done it. A whim? A hatred of prejudice? Maybe even a sense of empathy for another black sheep, a position Gideon had occupied himself on more than one occasion. Whatever the reason, it

had been the best decision of his career. Earthforce had argued at first, saying that it wasn't safe to assign a teep to an Explorer class ship. The long term nature of their missions made the risk of crew friction too great. Gideon had told them in a few short, pithy words just what to do with their friction, and which body parts to do it with. John had arrived a week later.

Gideon smiled as he remembered John arriving in his office on the Phoenix, standing so straight that the Captain could almost hear his bones creaking under the strain. The salute John had given him would have knocked a lesser man senseless. The young Ensign Matheson wouldn't meet his Captain's eyes, but swore his loyalty to the Captain and the ship in vehement terms. Gideon had been sure then that John knew all about the problems Earthforce had experienced in placing him. John had been so damned grateful for his job on the Phoenix that he'd nearly killed himself trying to prove his Captain had made the right decision. It had taken Gideon a long time to get the young telepath to relax, stop saluting every time they met, and start to enjoy himself a little.

When the First Officer, Molinari, had been killed in a landslide--[Stupid! She'd been told that area was unstable. What the hell was she trying to prove by going in there?]-Gideon had known exactly who to promote to fill the position. Sigurdson had been good, but far too self-interested. John had shown all the qualities needed for the XO position, including the one most important to Gideon. Loyalty.

That loyalty had developed into friendship and when Gideon had been given command of the Excalibur, he'd had no doubts about who his Exec should be. He'd been prepared to refuse the command over the issue, if it had proved necessary, but he was glad it hadn't. The politicians had caved in, and Gideon had started his search for the cure to the Drakh plague with the best First Officer in Earthforce at his side. Gideon smiled when he thought about what that search had produced, and what he and John had found along the way. Not just the cure, but their families and their future.

John's future included one bit of Gideon's past that the Captain hoped his successor would enjoy as much as he had. At their farewell dinner the previous evening, Gideon had handed over the keys to Deborah's motorbike, telling John that it was too much trouble to dismantle it and get it out of the bullet car tube. Deborah had smiled lasciviously as she'd advised Lily to make sure she took every opportunity for a fast, hard ride. Angel had blushed at that comment, reminding Gideon of an event he'd much rather have forgotten, when he suspected his sister-in-law had taken her own unauthorized ride on the bike, accompanied by a certain Ranger who was also Captain of a small trading vessel.

John had laughed as he took the keys, promising to pass them on to his successor in turn. It would be the Captain's privilege to ride the bike through the tubes. Angel's second blush had confirmed all Gideon's suspicions. He was now sure that she'd had her own ride on that bike with another Captain.

Gideon smiled to himself as he imagined a crew one day coming aboard to decommission the Excalibur, finding the bike, and wondering how it had got there. He hoped that day would be far in the dim and distant future.

Taking a deep breath, Gideon knew it was time to face his own future, but before he did so, there was one issue from his past that he needed to resolve; one last question that needed an answer, before he was ready to move onto his new life.

Pushing the data crystal into his pocket, Gideon left his office, heading for the bullet car. As he walked he made a mental list. [Deborah will be in the landing bay, supervising the loading of the shuttle, and Angel will be with her, helping look after Marcus. John is on the bridge, Luke is on duty in Medbay, and Lily is babysitting their children. Perfect.]

Lily was lying on her belly on the couch, her hair bound with an emerald silk bow that matched her light, long dress, bare feet peeking out under the hem. Dasha and Faylinn were playing quietly together in their bedroom, so Lily had taken a few moments to relax in the ensuing peace and quiet, trying to distract herself from her fears about what was to come later that morning. She was reading a book, when the door buzzer went off. She looked up, wondering who it could be, then gracefully swung around and up onto her feet, lightly stepping toward the door to open it. When it slid aside, she was surprised to see who was standing on the other side.

"Hello, Matthew. What a nice surprise." Matthew knew that both John and Luke were on duty, so he couldn't have come here looking for either of them. [Why else then?]

He gave her a soft smile. "Hi, Lily. Sorry to disturb you, but I need to talk to you." He chewed the inside of his lip for a moment then added, "Can I come in?" He seemed tense, unsure almost.

"Please." Lily nodded, stepping to the side and motioning for him to enter. "Can I offer you anything?" she added, as he sat down in one of the easy chairs.

Gideon shook his head as he looked up at her with haunted eyes. "The only thing

I need right now is an answer."

Lily frowned and sat down on the couch next to him, studying his face for a few seconds as he sat there, elbows leaning on his knees, fingers folded, a strangely intense look in his eyes. Finally, she asked, "An answer to what question?"

For a moment, he lowered his gaze to his hands, then took a deep breath and looked straight into her eyes. "Is Naima my daughter?"

Lily blinked at the unexpected question. [But I really should have seen it coming, knowing him. Especially now.] She smiled at him softly. "I would love to tell you, Matthew, really I would, but I don't know. We don't know. We never took the tests. To us, it makes no difference who the physical father is. Naima is our daughter."

Matthew opened his mouth, but before he could speak, she put her hand on his and continued, "But I can see how important this is for you. And there is a way for you to find out. Wait here."

She got up and disappeared inside the bedroom, then emerged from it with one of the scanners from Eriadne, and held it out to him. "Naima is sleeping in our bedroom. You can take the test yourself. I'll show you how."

Gideon looked up at her, his eyes expressing his thanks more eloquently than all the words in the universe would have been able to. He nodded, and Lily explained how the instrument worked. Then she led him to the bedroom door, opening it and letting him in with an encouraging smile.

Several minutes later, Matthew emerged from the bedroom, taking a deep breath as the door closed behind him. Lily stood in the middle of the living room, watching him carefully. His eyes were slightly red, though he didn't seem to have cried, but he smiled softly at her when he came over and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Thank you," he whispered, then took her face into his hands and bent down to place a feather-light kiss on her forehead. Lily gave him an understanding smile, feeling tears rise in her eyes as she lifted her hand to softly caress his cheek.

Luke looked up from his desk as the door to his office slid open. John and Lily stood there, John's arm around the tiny red-head's shoulders, providing both

emotional and physical support.

"It's time." John's voice was tight and controlled as he spoke.

Luke nodded, asking, "Are the kids all in the crèche?" Luke, John and Lily had agreed that they didn't want their children to watch or be part of what had to happen next. Dasha in particular could be sensitive to any suffering that his mother and her sisters might feel, although Luke thought it unlikely that would happen. Nevertheless, they had decided that the little boy should stay in the Medbay crèche with his sisters, shielded from any possible repercussions from the break.

Receiving a confirmatory nod from John, Luke logged out of the report he was reading, took a deep breath, and stood. Moving to Lily's other side he put his arm around her then leaned down to kiss her forehead gently. She looked up at him, her emerald green eyes red from crying. Luke kissed her again, whispering, "It's going to be all right. You'll be fine."

Lily's lips trembled as she tried to smile, saying, "I know. I think. It's just..." she paused to swallow a sob that rose in her throat, before continuing, "What will I do without them? I don't remember ever being without my sisters. How do I go on alone?" Her eyes filled with tears and Luke squeezed her tightly to his side, looking over her head at John, who stood on her other side, shaking his head sadly.

They had been over this issue again and again, but the answer never changed and never got easier. Lily would have to learn to live without her sisters. Luke was sure that her link to her children was now strong enough, and her link to her sisters weak enough, to prevent any significant trauma when the sisters parted. He had wanted the sisters to break their link before they arrived in Earth orbit, preferably in the controlled environment of Medbay, but the women had refused. They wanted to maintain their link right up to the moment when Demon and Angel had to depart the Excalibur. That moment had now arrived.

The Excalibur had arrived in Earth orbit two hours earlier. Since then, shuttles had been moving up and down, carrying the Gideons' and Angel's possessions down to the planet below, and bringing back supplies for the Excalibur's crew. Everything was now complete. Only two tasks remained. The sisters had to break their link, and the Captain had to hand over command to his successor.

Luke smiled down at Lily, putting everything he had into reassuring her. "You don't have to go on alone. You'll never be alone. You'll always have John and me standing beside you. Even when the children are grown and have gone their

separate ways into the universe, the three of us will go on together."

The tears overflowed from Lily's eyes as she looked up adoringly, first at Luke, then at John. She whispered, "Sweet Face and Sad Eyes. My dark and light wolves. How would I live without you?"

Luke looked over Lily's head at John and smiled, as the telepath said softly, "You'll never have to find out. Now, let's go. We mustn't keep the Captain waiting."

The doctor laughed quietly as he asked, "The old one or the new one?"

The three of them left Medbay together, arm in arm. As they went, Luke couldn't help thinking about the one person who would truly be alone in the future. How would Angel cope with losing her link to her sisters? How would she deal with being parted from her best friend? Luke found that he was more worried about how the raven-haired witch would handle the future than he was about Lily.

Angel stood alone, watching as Lily walked into the landing bay, with John and Luke at her sides. The closeness of the trio was an inevitable reminder of her own solitude, and Angel had to swallow a lump of fear that threatened to choke her. She was frightened of what was about to happen, fearful of what the future might hold, and saddened by the prospect of yet another loss from her life.

Sometimes, it seemed to Angel that her life was just the sum of all her losses. Her father, her mother, her life on Earth, her life on Eriadne, Lucas, Nikarran, Ilas, Jack, and now finally John, Lily, Luke and the life she had come to love on the Excalibur. How much loss could one person survive? How much more change could Angel deal with? The future was full of opportunity, but it was still scary. The offer of a screen test from the agent who had seen the vid of her performance as Ophelia had been exciting, but Angel was now unsure as to whether she should proceed with the offer. Perhaps she should settle into her new life on Earth before she tried to start a new career? Perhaps she should give herself a little time to adjust?

Angel shook her head vehemently, dismissing the internal debate. [Stop it! It's time to stand on your own two feet!] She admonished herself. Angel was grateful to Demon and Gideon for the home they were willing to give her on Earth, but she wanted more than that. She didn't want to be the useless younger sister, always dependent on Demon and Matthew for a home. She wanted a place of her own, a life of her own, a future of her own, and that would only be possible

if she made a success of her new career.

Angel straightened her shoulders and swallowed her fears. She would not allow this latest change to defeat her. She had faced every challenge life had thrown at her so far, and she would face this one, too. With her head held high, Angel silently defied the universe to do its worst. She would survive it. Somehow.

Demon walked into the landing bay, holding Matthew's hand tightly. Marcus walked on her other side, holding onto his mother with one hand, while clutching Half-Ted to his chest with the other. He sucked on the remaining fragments of the bear's ear, eyes scanning the landing bay to see who was there to say goodbye. The tall blonde could feel all her son's fear and anxiety, and she tried to send soothing feelings across their link. The little boy looked up at her, his golden brown eyes liquid with unshed tears, and she gave him an encouraging smile.

She and Matthew had debated whether to leave Marcus in the Medbay crèche with his cousins until after the severing of the sisters' link was completed, but the little boy had pleaded for them not to leave him behind. Since their return from Avalon, he had clung to his parents, convinced that if they left his sight, they might never return. Demon had only left him when she absolutely had to. She and Matthew had eventually given in to their son's pleading and agreed that he could come with them to the landing bay.

Demon sent through the link to her son, [It's going to be all right, I promise. Look, John, Luke and Lily have all come to see us off, and Auntie Angel is ready to come with us.] She tried to keep her mental tone cheerful as she sent, but she could see from the look on her son's face that she hadn't convinced him. Marcus was scared.

[Well, he's not the only one.] Demon looked over at Angel, standing with her back stiff and her head high. Despite not being able to read her sister's feelings, Demon knew that the stance was sheer bravado. Angel was nearly as scared as Marcus.

Matthew's hand tightened on hers, and Demon looked around at her husband. As usual, her heart skipped a beat as she took in the leather jacket he wore over his black uniform. Demon wondered if there would ever come a time when the sight of him didn't make her hormones race, even when he no longer wore that uniform. She doubted it. Moving her eyes upwards, she could see that Matthew had his best poker face in place, but the tall blonde knew that her husband had his own fears to contend with. She sighed internally, thinking, [So many frightened people. How did we let this happen?] The answer was obvious. They

had done it to themselves, and primarily for the sake of the little person Demon carried inside her. The daughter who had now been growing for nearly a month, and who was only a couple of millimeters long.

Demon smiled as she thought about how her body was changing, and about how much Matthew enjoyed examining her every morning. He was fascinated by the way her breasts were growing, although he was less delighted by the fact that the subsequent tenderness meant he could only look, but not touch, for the moment at least. Demon had reassured him that both the growth and the tenderness would probably stop in the next couple of weeks, after which he could resume his favorite habit of fondling and playing with her nipples at every opportunity.

She had then told her husband about the nausea that was likely to accompany the reduced tenderness of her breasts. When she had been pregnant with Marcus, Demon had been sick for weeks. She was hoping that this time would be different. If not, Matthew was going to be on very short rations for a while. She also hoped that severing her link with her sisters wouldn't affect the embryo she carried inside her in any way.

With a nervous smile at Matthew, then a reassuring surge of love through her link with Marcus, Demon let go of their hands and stepped forward. She looked at Lily, then Angel, and said softly, "It's time. Let's do it."

Holding her hands out to her sisters, Demon closed her eyes and linked with them.

Gideon watched as the three women joined hands and minds. When Deborah had released his hand, he'd lifted their son into his arms, and now hugged Marcus tightly. The little boy was still clinging to his teddy bear, but had stopped sucking on the remainder of the ear, as he watched his mother, his eyes round and large with apprehension. The Captain felt his son's breath hot on his ear as the boy whispered, "Will Mummy be all right? She won't be hurt, will she?"

Marcus had asked the question over and over since he'd been told that they were leaving the Excalibur. The boy understood the link between the sisters far better than Gideon was able to, and Marcus' fears over the consequences of severing that link had made his father apprehensive, too. Did his son instinctively know something? Something bad? Deborah had repeatedly reassured both father and son that everything would be fine, but Gideon had his doubts. Was she just trying to soothe them? To calm their fears? He told himself not to be stupid.

Deborah never lied. If she said she'd be fine, then she would.

"Nothing bad is going to happen. Mummy told you that, and you know she always tells the truth." Gideon put everything he had into believing what he had just said, knowing that his son would pick up on any doubts or fears he might entertain. What worried him was that while Deborah always told the truth, it wasn't always the whole truth. Sometimes she had a way of twisting the truth to make it mean what she wanted it to. Was this one of those times? He pushed the thought away before Marcus could detect his doubts.

Marcus nodded seriously, seeming to accept his father's words, but the bear's head was lifted back into position, and the child resumed his comforting sucking on the fragments of its ear.

Gideon nodded across at Luke and John, the only other occupants of the landing bay. Their other friends were waiting outside to bid them farewell, but the sisters had wanted these last few moments of privacy before their link was dissolved.

Turning his attention back to his wife, Gideon could see that the three women had now all closed their eyes. Their lips moved in unison, but no sound emerged. The Captain had become a good lip-reader over the years, but he couldn't make sense of what they said, concluding that they were not using English, but some other language. Probably some ancient, esoteric tongue known only to them, and possible to Galen. For a moment, Gideon wished that Max was there, to translate for him. Then he decided that it didn't matter. He probably wouldn't understand it any better in English. It was all magic, after all.

After a few moments, the air between the Captain and the women seemed to dance, shifting like a heat haze. Unlike previous occasions when Gideon had watched the witches merge, there was no glow of light. Perhaps that had been generated by the Vorlon that Deborah carried within her. Now the Vorlon slept, perhaps that power was withdrawn. All that was visible was a movement in the substance of space, a curling, writhing motion that distorted the ether surrounding the witches.

Gideon glanced over at where John and Luke stood, and saw John shake his head. Then the telepath lifted his hand to his brow, rubbing it and closing his eyes. It looked as if he had a headache and was trying to ease it. At the same moment, Marcus gave a soft cry, and Gideon looked at him anxiously.

"What? What's the matter?"

The little boy looked up at his father, his eyes full of pain and fear as he

whispered, "It hurts! Stop it, Daddy! Make it go away!"

Gideon looked over at Luke, calling out, "Doc! Over here. Now!" He hugged his son tightly, kissing his blond curls gently. He hoped that maybe Marcus would feel the love he was trying to project, and that it would ease any pain the child was picking up from his mother.

Luke started toward them, but before he could take two steps, a triple wail of dismay stopped him in his tracks. Gideon watched, appalled, as his wife slumped to the deck, her sisters falling with her. He wanted to run to her, but was also aware that his son was sobbing frantically, needing his father's attention and love.

The Captain ran forward, still hugging his son, and fell to his knees at his wife's side. Holding his son in one arm, he reached out with his other hand and stroked his wife's face. She was pale and cold, her lips blue, and her eyes closed.

"Deborah!" He tried to pull her upright with his free arm, then had to let go of Marcus, as the child wriggled free and flung himself at his mother, screaming for her to wake up. Gideon reached out and pulled Deborah into his arms, almost crushing Marcus between them. He was hardly aware of John calling Lily's name, and Luke holding Angel gently, stroking her cheek.

Deborah's eyes fluttered open, and Gideon saw they were black with pain and sadness. His sense of relief at her regaining consciousness was almost overwhelmed by the wave of sadness that swept over him as she looked up at him.

Licking her dry lips, Deborah whispered. "They're gone. Oh god, Matthew, I've lost them." Then she tucked her head into his shoulder and wept.

Demon pulled herself together quickly. She didn't have time to indulge herself in misery. Too many other people were in pain and they needed her to be strong. Pulling her head back from Matthew's shoulder, she looked across at where Luke held Angel, gently rocking the weeping woman, but gazing over her head at John and Lily. The longing in Luke's eyes was clear. He wanted to be with them, wanted to comfort Lily. Demon watched as the doctor dragged his eyes away from his partners, and looked fondly down at Angel, hugging her and whispering reassurances into her ear.

Demon pulled her attention back to her son, who was still crying softly, clinging

to her. She wrapped her arms around him, and started sending calming waves of love through their link. Looking up into Matthew's worried eyes, she smiled sadly, saying, "I'm OK now. Go help Luke with Angel. I'll take care of Marcus."

The expression in Matthew's eyes changed from concern to love, and he smiled as he kissed her gently, saying, "I'm not sure I believe you. You're just trying to be strong for everyone again, aren't you?"

Demon laughed shakily, whispering back, "Maybe a little. But I'll deal with my troubles later. For now, I'll cope." Matthew kissed her again, then stood and moved over to where Luke held Angel. Demon watched, still rocking her son in her arms, as her husband knelt by Luke and Angel, and took the younger witch from the doctor's arms. Angel put her arms around Matthew's neck and clung to him, still sobbing as she buried her head in his shoulder.

As soon as Angel released him, Luke rushed over to John and Lily, and the three of them held each other tightly. Demon could feel the love and comfort the two men were projecting from where she sat on the deck, still hugging and soothing her son. After a few moments, Marcus' sobs subsided, and he looked up at his mother, his eyes still red. *[/It hurt. You said it wouldn't do that.]/* His mental tone was accusing, and Demon hurried to reassure him.

[/It was just a little pain. Like when you fall and bang your knee. It hurts for a bit, but it's soon over.]/

The little boy considered this seriously for a moment, then nodded reluctantly. *[/I guess. It doesn't hurt now. Is Auntie Angel hurt, too? Is that why Daddy's hugging her?]/*

Demon smiled down at her son, picking up on his slight resentment that his father was comforting someone else. *[/Auntie Angel needs a hug. You and I can hug each other, and Daddy will hug us later, but for now, Auntie Angel needs him more. Now, where's my handkerchief? I need to clean your face. How did it get so dirty?]/*

Marcus giggled softly. *[/Your face is dirty, too, Mummy!]/*

Demon wiped her son's cheeks, then passed him the handkerchief. He dabbed at her face, considerably cheered by the fact that for once he got to clean up his mother. By the time they had finished, Demon looked across to see that both Angel and Lily were sitting upright, wiping their faces and collecting themselves. Matthew still had his arm around Angel's shoulder and was speaking to her softly, too softly for Demon to make out his words. Without thinking, Demon

sent to her sister, [Angel? Are you OK now?]

[I'm fine. Thanks for sending Matthew over. Lily needs Luke right now.] It wasn't until the reply sounded in her head that Demon realized what had happened. She and Angel were still linked!

The tall blonde stared at her younger sister, speechless with astonishment, and Angel stared back. Demon stuttered out loud, "But...but...I thought...we shouldn't..." before falling silent again.

Matthew was looking over at her, frowning in confusion. "What's the problem? Are you OK?" Demon realized that the shock clearly written on her face, and on Angel's, was worrying him. She hurried to reassure him.

"We're fine! We're more than fine. Angel and I can still link to each other. Somehow, we kept our connection." As soon as the words were out, Demon knew that she should have been more discrete. Lily moaned softly, and turned her head back into Luke's shoulder.

Demon scrambled to her feet and Matthew moved quickly to take Marcus from her. She and Angel rushed over to where Lily lay, and flung themselves at their tiny sister. Luke and John released the little red-head and the sisters wrapped their arms around each other, holding each other, hugging and crying again. As they embraced, Demon heard a jumble of words in her head.

[Oh, Lily, I'm so sorry...Don't cry, Angel...What's happening? Demon?...This isn't supposed...Why is this...]

[STOP!] Demon held her hands to her head, closing her eyes tightly, and the words faded. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes again and smiled at her sisters, who were both staring at her, their confusion clear.

"Let me try something." She spoke aloud, then moved so that she wasn't touching either of her sisters. She sent to Angel, *[Angel? Can you hear me?]*

Angel nodded and sent back. *[Yes. Loud and clear.]*

Demon turned to look at Lily and sent again. *[Lily? Are you getting this?]* Silence. There was no response of any kind.

"What's going on here? What are you doing?" Matthew's voice distracted Demon. She looked up at where he stood above her, holding Marcus in his arms, glaring down at the three sisters, still sitting on the landing bay deck.

"Give us a moment, Matthew. Please? Something unexpected has happened. Something good, I think." Demon smiled and sent a wave of love, watching as both Matthew and Marcus smiled. She knew her husband wasn't the most patient man in the galaxy, but also knew that he would wait, as long as he knew she was safe.

Turning back to her sisters, Demon reached out and took Lily's hand. [Can you hear me now, Lily?]

Lily's voice in her head was both startled and jubilant. [Yes! I can hear you! Oh, Demon, I can still hear you!]

Demon smiled and reached out her other hand, touching Angel. Instantly, she felt her other sister linked in her mind. [We can still be three, but only when we're in physical contact. Angel and I still seem to have some connection over a greater distance. We'll have to test how far, but I suspect it may only be line of sight or a little more. But with Lily, and I suspect with Ilas too, we have to actually touch. It's better than nothing, and more than I'd hoped.]

Feeling her sisters' happiness and hearing their words of delight in her mind, Demon leaned forward and hugged them both, sending, [We're still together in a way. Nothing can ever change that.]

Gideon looked down as the sisters hugged each other, then looked across at John, seeing the smile on the telepath's face. "What? What's going on?"

John explained quietly how the sisters could still link when they touched, and how Demon and Angel could still link when apart, but only when close to each other. Gideon tried to decide whether he thought this was good news or not.

In a way, he'd been looking forward to having his wife to himself. He'd learned to live with Deborah's connection with her sisters, but a part of him had always resented their closeness. He'd ruthlessly suppressed that part of him, telling himself that jealousy was an ugly emotion, and that Deborah had enough love for all of them. Nevertheless, that ugliness had reared its head again, when Gideon had found out that his wife's link to her sisters would be broken when they left the Excalibur.

He'd been disgusted with himself when he'd felt the ripple of satisfaction that at last he and Marcus would have Deborah to themselves. They could be a real nuclear family, welcoming their new daughter into the world, with no outside

distractions. Again, Gideon had pushed that feeling away, telling himself that he had no right to think or feel that way. He loved Angel and Lily, why should it matter to him that Deborah was linked with them and not him? But somehow it did, and the part of him of which he was ashamed had been pleased at the prospect of the link being severed.

Now it seemed that Deborah was still linked to Angel, and could connect to Lily when in physical contact. Gideon couldn't stop the thought that rang in his head. [Why them and not me?] He thought he'd dealt with that jealousy years before, but it seemed ignoring it hadn't made it go away. As he watched the sisters celebrating their continued connection, the Captain pushed all those negative feelings deep down within himself. He wouldn't allow such pettiness to mar his wife's joy in the way things had turned out. He would share her happiness. Later. For now, it was time to move on to the next stage of their departure. This was the part he'd really been dreading.

Smiling down at his wife, Gideon lowered his son to the deck, then reached out to pull Deborah to her feet. "That's wonderful." He hugged his wife, kissing her cheek, and making sure that the only emotion she would be able to detect was his pleasure that she was safe and well.

The Captain held his wife in one arm, and his son with the other hand, and smiled sadly at the others. "It's time to let some of the crew in here. We have things to do and places to go, and we can't hold up the new Captain of the ship. He'd better not be late for his first mission."

John and Luke helped Lily and Angel to their feet, and Deborah leaned against Gideon's side, whispering, "Matthew? Are you OK?" She'd obviously picked up on some of his less positive feelings about this moment.

He turned to smile at her, admitting softly, so the others couldn't hear, "This isn't the easiest thing I've ever done." It was the truth, of course, as Deborah would have sensed a lit instantly, but it wasn't the whole truth. His wife looked at him sadly, and sent a wave of her love and admiration for him. Gideon leaned forward and kissed her lips. "Thank you. That helps."

Letting go of her and Marcus, Gideon moved over to where John had released Lily and Luke, and now stood waiting patiently, his hand hovering over the door signal. Gideon nodded and John pressed the control, opening the door of landing bay to those who were waiting outside.

John dropped his hand, feeling his heart beating faster, as the moment he'd been longing for approached. This was the culmination of all his hopes and dreams. This was the moment when he got everything he'd ever wanted. A job he loved, a ship he was proud of, and his family by his side. What more could he ask for?

Looking across at his Captain, John knew the answer to that question. The only sour note in the midst of his happiness was that he would miss Matthew Gideon. He would miss him in the same way he would miss an arm or a leg if it were severed from his body. The friendship that this man had offered, and which John had finally allowed himself to accept, had been the most important thing in his life, before John had met Luke and Lily. It was the friendship that had first enabled John to trust, to believe he could rely on another human being, and more importantly, on a 'normal'. Without Matthew Gideon, John had no idea what would have happened to him. Shuffled off into a desk job in some deep, dark hole within Earthforce HQ, no doubt. He might even have become one of the victims of the Drakh plague during the time it took the Excalibur to find the cure.

Knowing that his promotion came at the cost of his best friend and mentor's retirement was the only thing that dampened John's enthusiasm for the future. Matthew insisted that he was ready for this step, and John knew that his friend was anxious for Demon to be safe on Earth during her pregnancy, but still John worried. How would Matthew handle retirement? John looked across at Demon where she stood at the foot of the ramp leading up to the shuttle that would take them to Earth, and saw that the tall blonde's face was frozen into the expressionless mask she always wore when concealing her emotions. He knew her well enough to know that she was worried about Matthew, too.

As the crewmembers entered the landing bay and lined up at attention, John pushed his concerns to one side. There was nothing to be done about it now. Now was the time to celebrate.

The telepath's mouth quirked into a half smile when he saw who brought up the rear of the procession. G'Tan still limped, and leaned heavily on a walking stick, but the Narn Marine Sergeant obviously had no intention of letting the man who had saved his life leave in his absence. Like the other Marines present, he was dressed in the Narn equivalent of full dress uniform.

John heard Luke's exasperated sigh, and looked around to see the doctor shaking his head and muttering, "I told him he was confined to quarters! I'd never have let him out of Medbay if I'd known he was..."

The telepath interrupted his partner's grumbling, sending a fond mental reproach, [If it won't kill him, let G'Tan be. You can shout at him afterwards,

and send him back to Medbay if you must, but he belongs here now.]]

Luke glared at John, then subsided into quiet muttering. G'Tan positioned himself at the end of the line of his Narn Marines, straightened and gave his Captain a brisk salute.

"Excalibur crew reporting as ordered, Sir!"

*Gideon saluted back, again surprising John with a crisp, smart gesture. If John had been asked a week ago, he'd have sworn that his Captain didn't know *how* to salute like that.*

"At ease, Sergeant." Gideon waved nonchalantly at the crew assembled for his inspection. In some ways, the term 'motley crew' could have been invented for this group. There were Earthforce personnel, including Jackson, Siddhartha and Roberts, the latter having been with them since the search for the cure had started. These three, and the other Earthforce crew present, were all in full dress uniform.

John smiled to himself. That would annoy Matthew, who hadn't bothered to wear his own dress uniform for this occasion. The Captain would only put on those clothes when there was absolutely no alternative. Well, at least after today Matthew would never have to suffer that itchy woolen cloth again.

Alongside the Earthforce crew, the newer members of the Excalibur team stood proudly. Ankaren represented the Brakiri on board, as well as his Sensor team. Dunall had her arms folded neatly under her robe, and when the others had saluted, she had bowed in Minbari fashion. Varzat stood proudly at parade rest, coming closer to the Drazi equivalent of a smile than John had ever seen before. It wasn't an expression often seen on a Drazi face.

Even the Pak'ma'ra and Gaim were represented in the numbers lined up for the Captain's final inspection, although John wondered how they had managed to drag the Pak'ma'ra away from their fish. They didn't mingle much with the rest of the crew as a rule, being unable to communicate with most of them. Pak'ma'ra still refused to learn any language but their own.

Gideon moved to stand facing his people, ready to make his final address to the crew. John nodded to Luke, who moved to the panel by the door and pressed a control. This would allow the whole crew, at every station and mess hall throughout the Excalibur, to hear and see the Captain's farewell speech.

John moved to his Captain's side, all too aware that this was the last time he

would stand there. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Luke move over to the foot of the shuttle ramp, joining the women and Marcus, waiting for the end of an era.

Gideon swallowed, wondering if were possible for anyone to be prouder of his people than he was at that moment. He looked at those assembled in front of him, thinking of all the others watching and listening, and wondering what he could say to express his pride and gratitude for their service.

Scanning along the line of faces, he was inevitably reminded of the people who were missing. Those who had died in service, those who hadn't lived long enough to be there. The missing faces flashed across Gideon's mind, and he closed his eyes on the wave of guilt that accompanied the memories. Every loss was a scar on his soul, a reminder that he should have been quicker, stronger, smarter, whatever it took to keep his people safe. Every missing face was a memory of how he had failed in that respect. Well, now was the time to hand over to a man who could do a better job.

The Captain moved to the end of the line, where G'Tan stood, valiantly trying not to lean on his stick. Gideon shook his head and smiled, as he moved in front of the Narn and whispered, "You old fool. You didn't have to drag yourself down here. I'd have come to you in your quarters or in Medbay."

G'Tan wouldn't meet his eye, but the Narn Marine's lips twitched in a half-smile as he whispered back, "Takes one to know one. I know my place."

Gideon smiled and cleared his throat, then dug into his pocket, pulling out a small square box. He raised his voice, so everyone could hear. "It is my honor and my privilege to present Marine Sergeant G'Tan of the House of G'Lan with the Earthforce Medal of Honor, for valiant service above and beyond the call of duty." As he spoke he opened the box, and pinned the ribbon on the Narn's tunic. G'Tan's chest expanded and Gideon thought for a moment that the Marine might just explode with sheer pride. The Captain leaned a little closer as he passed the box to G'Tan, and whispered, "The next time you get yourself in a shuttle crash, put your safety harness on!"

G'Tan's red eyes sparkled as he murmured, "Next time, I'll get a pilot who doesn't crash the shuttle!"

Gideon couldn't suppress his snort of laughter, but moved quickly on to where his second officer stood, immaculately turned out in her dress uniform. Lieutenant

Jackson looked warily at her Captain as he came to a halt in front of her. She knew Gideon's sense of humor well enough to know that he might just tease her about something, even at this solemn moment.

"Lieutenant Jackson. You've served the Excalibur loyally for five years now, and for the last four, your support and hard work as the Second Officer of this ship have been invaluable to me. This is well deserved and overdue."

From his other pocket, Gideon pulled out a new rank bar--half silver, half gold--and the shoulder symbols of a Lieutenant Commander. He gestured for Jackson to step forward, and he pinned the bars to her uniform. Jackson's face had flushed under her dark skin, and her eyes had filled with tears, but she swallowed hard and managed to whisper, "Thank you, Sir. It's been a pleasure and an honor serving with you."

The Captain quirked a mischievous smile, saying softly. "I'll remind you of that the next time we play poker." The last game the Lieutenant had sat in on had left her muttering about Captains who were too damned lucky for their own good.

Jackson couldn't help but grin as she whispered back, "There's never going to be a next time! You cheat!"

Gideon raised his eyebrows and grinned back. "Absolutely. You have to play me again to figure out how." Jackson shook her head, laughing softly, but still glowing with pride and joy at her promotion.

The Captain stepped back and turned to his First Officer and friend, knowing that there could be no further delay. It was time.

Demon watched sadly as her husband gave his farewell speech to his crew, handed over command of his ship to John, giving him the promotion that went with the job, and passing over his data crystals with all the command codes. She could feel Matthew's mixed sorrow and pride, the maelstrom of conflicting emotions he felt, as he performed the last ceremony of his previous life. She could feel John's pride and gratitude, his happiness and sorrow, as he accepted command of the Excalibur. Demon could feel the sadness and joy of all those assembled. Regret at the loss of the only Captain many of them had ever known, happiness that a man they trusted implicitly was taking over. The mixture of feelings surging around the landing bay, and throughout the ship, was almost overwhelming.

A small whimper of distress from her son attracted Demon's attention, and she looked down to see that Marcus had again raised Half-Ted to his mouth. She stooped and lifted the child into her arms, sending calm and love through their link. [It's OK, darling. Don't worry. Everything will work out, I promise.]

Marcus looked up at her anxiously, sending, [Daddy's sad. He doesn't want to leave. Why are we going to Earth when he wants to stay here?]

Demon sighed, wondering how she could explain this to her son, without revealing the fact of her pregnancy. She could only try. [Daddy wants to be sure that we're safe. You know how much we've all hated it when the Excalibur has had to fight. He doesn't want us to go through that again. We'll all be safe and together on Earth. You, me, Daddy and Auntie Angel.]

That thought seemed to reassure Marcus, and he sucked on Half-Ted's remaining scrap of an ear as he considered his next question. [Won't Dasha come to say goodbye to me?]

Demon half laughed, noticing that yet again, Marcus ignored his female cousins. She was sure his disdain for the opposite sex would change as he got older, but for now there was only one cousin he would truly miss. [Uncle Luke will get Dasha and his sisters soon.]

As she sent the thought, she saw Matthew give one final salute to John, and the ceremony was over. Luke moved toward the landing bay door, as the other crewmembers surged around Matthew and John, congratulating their new Captain, expressing their thanks and good wishes to the retiring incumbent of the role.

Demon stood quietly with Angel and Lily, watching from the sidelines, as the crew of the Excalibur celebrated and commiserated. Then G'Tan started to limp toward the witches, smiling as he came to a standstill, leaning heavily on his stick.

He bowed his head slightly, then smiled at the three of them. "Ladies. I will miss our weapons practice sessions. I have learned nearly as much from the three of you as I have taught." Turning to Angel and Demon, G'Tan smiled sadly, "Your presence on the Excalibur will be sorely missed." The Narn Marine reached out and took Demon's free hand gently, bowing to kiss it, before moving on to Angel and repeating the gesture.

"You old rogue, stop trying to charm them into staying. Don't you have enough wives already?"

Demon looked up to see Matthew standing behind G'Tan, grinning widely.

The Narn laughed and turned. "You can't blame me for trying. I'll miss them and my honorary nephew." He leaned on his stick again, as he lifted his spotted hand to Marcus' head, stroking the boy's curls gently.

Marcus reached out, wanting G'Tan to take him in his arms. Demon tried to hold him back, but G'Tan shifted his weight and took the child, holding him to his chest. "It's all right. I'm not totally crippled yet and he's not heavy. Not for a Narn, anyway."

Demon smiled as Matthew moved to stand beside her, and put his arm around her waist. She leaned her head toward him, turning her cheek to accept his kiss. Again she felt all her husband's doubts and fears, but most of all she felt his reluctance to depart. The tall blonde knew that Matthew hated leaving the people who had become his friends as much as leaving his command. She could hardly blame him. She felt the same.

Watching the Narn Marine speak quietly to their son, Demon said softly, "Whenever you visit Earth, we expect you to come and stay with us, G'Tan. And bring whichever woman you've charmed into your bed at the time, too."

G'Tan looked over and laughed. "Only one? And what about the pouchlings? Should I bring them too?"

Matthew laughed aloud as he said, "All of them. Bring the whole family. I want to know what names they all choose when they grow up. They'll have suffered enough from the names you gave them." Demon laughed as well, remembering how embarrassed Matthew had been when the eleven Narn pouchlings had been named after him. Her husband continued, "I'll expect at least one M'Tson, a Jo'Math, a N'Thes, and maybe a L'Rav." He winked and nodded to where Luke Raven had entered the landing bay, carrying Naima, with Dasha and Faylinn walking behind.

Marcus wriggled in G'Tan's arms and the Narn carefully set him down. Running over to his cousins, Marcus flung his arms around Dasha, hugging him tightly. Demon watched as the two boys walked over to where the adults waited, alone now that everyone except Lieutenant Jackson and G'Tan had left the landing bay.

Marcus looked up longingly at his parents as they stood side by side in front of the shuttle ramp, and said pleadingly, "Can't Dasha come with us? Please?"

Demon knelt in front of the two boys and smiled sadly. "Dasha would miss his parents and his sisters, Marcus. He'll miss you, too, I know, but they'll all come and visit us when they can. All of our friends will." She looked up and smiled at Jackson and G'Tan. "Soon, I hope."

The Narn Marine and newly promoted First Officer both smiled and nodded, reassuring Marcus that he would see them again the very next time the Excalibur visited Earth. What no one mentioned was that none of them knew when that would be.

Matthew leaned down and held his arms out to his son, and Marcus ran to his father. Lifting the little boy into his arms, Matthew smiled at G'Tan and Jackson. "We'll hold you to that. Now we have to get going, or we'll miss our entry slot. With the amount of traffic going to and from Earth these days, it could be hours before we get another." Demon sensed the pride Matthew felt when he said that. A few years before there had been no traffic in or out of Earth's atmosphere. The Drakh plague had blockaded Earth from all travelers, until the Excalibur had found the cure.

She watched as Matthew said his final goodbyes to G'Tan, Jackson, Lily, Luke and-most poignant of all-John. Demon's eyes filled with tears at the feelings of her friends and family. She couldn't help but share their sorrow and pain at parting after so long serving together, but she knew that her worst pain was still to come. First, Demon, Angel and Matthew said goodbye to Lily's children. Demon watched, as Matthew gave Naima one last hug, and knew that he would miss the little girl, who had always been a favorite. Then it was Demon and Angel's turn to give farewell hugs to Lily's partners, and to say good bye to G'Tan and Jackson.

Finally turning to her sisters, Demon held out her arms. Lily and Angel rushed toward her, and the three of them held each other tightly. The feelings, thoughts and memories that surged between them nearly drove Demon to her knees, but she held on, knowing that she had to be strong, had to control herself, or everyone on the ship would share her sorrow. The tall blonde knew that her husband and son were suffering enough at their own losses. They didn't need to share what she and her sisters were feeling.

Eventually, a hand on her shoulder gently pulled Demon back from her sisters' embrace, and she looked around into her husband's sad eyes. "It's time. We have to go."

With one last surge of love, Demon released her sisters and watched as Lily ran into John and Luke's arms. Matthew's arm reached around Demon's waist and

he kissed her cheek again, holding their son in his other arm, pulling her gently up the ramp into the shuttle. Demon reached out and took Angel by the hand, pulling her sister along with them.

They all turned at the top of the ramp, watching as John, Luke, Lily and the children paused in the doorway, through which Jackson and G'Tan had already left. Tears streamed down the sisters' faces as they waved a final farewell, then John and Luke slowly steered Lily and the children out of the landing bay. Demon turned as Marcus sobbed into Matthew's shoulder, the tall blonde still holding Angel's hand tightly. Her sister was trying to be strong, sending through their link, [/Hold on, Demon. Just hold on. We'll survive this, just like we've survived everything else. Somehow, we'll get by.]/

Demon stared at her husband as he tried to comfort their son, and braced her shoulders. Angel was right. Somehow they would carry on.

*Lily clamped down on her emotions as she turned to look through the window into the main landing bay, wiping her cheeks and fighting back her tears fiercely. [I will *not* cry anymore. I'm not the only one who has to say goodbye to someone they love!] she told herself sternly, stepping forward, watching the shuttle ramp retract and the door closing. She had to suppress a stab of envy that Demon and Angel were still together, and could still be one, even if only when a short distance from each other. Instead, she concentrated on being happy for her sisters, and wishing them all the best for their new lives.*

*[I still have John and Luke and our children, and we love each other!] Lily told herself, as she stopped a short distance from the window. John and Luke had tried to reassure her, telling her she could always call her sisters, and that she would be able to see them again when the Excalibur visited Earth, or maybe even on Mars. But how many years would pass until they would meet again? And how many more until the next meeting? The thought of her sisters not being there for so long, of not being able to talk to them, fight, cry or laugh with them for years, was unbearable to Lily. [It will never be the same again! They aren't *here*, physically nor mentally; we're apart now, like limbs torn from a body! Four, but not one!]*

At the edge of her consciousness, she registered Faylinn and Dasha, begging to be lifted up, so they could better see the shuttle leave with their cousin, aunts and uncle. John was holding Naima in his arms, so Luke swooped Faylinn up to sit on John's shoulders, before lifting Dasha onto his own. The twins continued sniffing, as they held on to their fathers' heads, but Lily found herself unable to

give them reassurance, as she was shaking with the effort of just standing there, of not banging her fists against the glass and crying out, 'No, don't go, don't leave me alone!'

She knew pain, the excruciating mental and physical pain of the Vorlons' punishments when she and her sisters had rebelled against them, but she had survived. Because she'd always known that her sisters would be there, supporting her, helping her, if not with deeds or through the link, then in spirit and words, with soothing caresses, embraces, or by just being there, ready to listen or give encouragement when she needed it. But now her sisters were leaving, leaving her alone, and the pain and fear she felt tearing at the core of her being was worse than anything the Vorlon had subjected her to, worse than anything she had ever felt, tearing her apart alive, inside out.

[/We're here, Ma, we won't leave you alone!/] Lily felt a sudden surge of love and concern, as the comforting mental presence of her partners' and children's minds engulfed her, and Lily found that feeling their pain about the separation eased her own--just enough to make it bearable. She realized that Dasha, aided by John, had brought their minds together in a family link. Lily smiled sadly, sending her gratitude and love before they withdrew again, until she could just feel her family's minds as a soothing presence at the edge of her consciousness.

Beyond the window, the shuttle's thrusters were firing up--[Trace is flying.] Lily thought numbly, [Of course, who else?]-and she watched with dry, burning eyes as it slowly lifted off the deck, before easing its way toward the now open doors into outer space, carrying away Angel, Demon, Marcus and Matthew. Just before she lost sight of the shuttle, Lily surged forward, pressing the palms of her hands flat against the glass, and though she knew her sisters wouldn't hear her, she sent out all her pain, fear and love, accompanied by two words: [/One, always!/]

Gideon lay staring at the ceiling of the bedroom, feeling the light breeze that blew through the window he had opened a short time before. The air was warm, and the sound of the sea washing on the shore should have been soporific, but he couldn't sleep.

He looked over at his wife lying asleep next to him and smiled. The sheet had fallen around her hips as usual, but he couldn't admire the view he normally enjoyed when that happened. Deborah was wearing a bra, supporting her sore and tender breasts. When they had made love earlier, Gideon had been careful not to fondle her there, although it had been difficult. He sighed, wondering how

long it would be before she would enjoy his touch again.

Turning his gaze back to the ceiling, Gideon mulled over the events of the last few hours. When they'd arrived at the beach house in the early evening, he'd been amazed to find that everything was ready for them, all their things unpacked and stored away. There was even hot food waiting in the kitchen for dinner. Deborah had somehow organized everything in advance, even getting technicians in to install shielding in their bedroom. She'd laughed softly when Gideon had expressed his amazement at her forethought, telling him that she had no intention of going even a single night without making love to him, at least until her powers faded again as her pregnancy progressed. Then she'd carefully closed the window to complete the shielding circuit, and pounced.

Their lovemaking had been full of laughter, tenderness and abiding affection. Gideon had been able to feel Deborah's concern for him and their future together on Earth, and he had tried to project reassurance that everything would be fine. He wished he believed that he had been successful.

Continuing to stare at the ceiling, Gideon wondered what the future would hold. The next few days would be full of activity, while they settled into their new life, but after that...What did a rich, retired Captain do with himself?

Gideon told himself to stop whining and count his blessings. He had a beautiful wife and son, and a daughter on the way. He had more money than he knew what to do with, and homes in several countries that he could visit at any time. He had friends on Earth and spread around the galaxy, and the meant to visit them whenever he wanted. What the hell did he have to worry about?

[Promises. Unkept promises.] The thought refused to be ignored. Gideon knew that his search for the killers of his friends on the Cerberus was incomplete, and his promise to Dureena to find the killer of her baby was unfulfilled. Retirement hadn't nullified those promises. He would continue to search.

Another thought that came unbidden to his mind was instantly banished, but it crept back to niggle at his brain. [Angel. That's another thing you have to worry about.] Gideon may have had a gorgeous, loving wife in his bed and a beautiful son sleeping next door, but he also had temptation sleeping just down the hall. He vowed to himself that he would never again succumb to that temptation, and turned his thoughts to the future.

Looking at his wife again, he let his eyes linger on the soft swell of her belly. There was no outward sign of her pregnancy as yet, but Gideon knew that his daughter was there, growing every day. The months until she was born would

fly past, and he would need to help Deborah prepare for her birth. He had promised to rub his wife's back and feet, to get her any food she might crave, no matter how odd, and to support her through this pregnancy, as he'd been unable to do when she was carrying Marcus.

Gideon closed his eyes, finally drifting into sleep, as he told himself that this was what he would do with himself in the future. He would be the best husband and father he knew how to be.

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