

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

by *The Space Witches*



High Priestess Latharr

Chapter 1

23rd June 2273

Gideon looked across the conference room table at Ranger Trulann, wondering what the Minbari had in store for them this time. The Ranger had brought them many interesting bits of news and assignments over the years they had worked together, and Gideon had no doubt that this time would be no different. They exchanged pleasantries, while awaiting the arrival of the others the Captain had called to the briefing. John and Luke had both been off duty when Trulann had arrived, a couple of hours ahead of his anticipated ETA.

Having told Trulann how Marcus was growing like a weed and that Deborah hoped the Ranger could join them for lunch, Gideon asked, "So how did you get here so early? You usually arrive about two minutes before your ETA. It's not like you to be so far off the mark." While he waited for a response, Gideon wondered what creative excuse Trulann would come up with for avoiding the meal. The Minbari seemed to find some of Marcus' eating habits disconcerting. Thinking of occasions when his son had become over-excited while eating, the Captain could

hardly blame him.

Trulann smiled. "I underestimated the latest improvements made to the White Star's engines. Our engineers have finally been able to incorporate the design changes used when the Excalibur was built on the smaller scale required by the White Star fleet. We're still not quite as fast as the Excalibur, but we're getting close. I hadn't appreciated just how close."

Gideon nodded, wondering how long his ship would retain the position of being the fastest thing in the ISA fleet. Not that it would be his concern for much longer. Before he could respond, the doors opened and John and Luke entered. After an exchange of greetings, the Captain called the meeting to order.

"Trulann has brought us details of our next assignment. I'm hoping it's a nice, simple mission to ease me into retirement, but I guess that would be too much to hope for. What have you got for us, Trulann?"

The Ranger looked surprised. "Retirement? I have not been advised of this. When is this happening and why? Although humans have a shorter life-span than Minbari, you do not yet appear to be infirm, Captain. Why would you wish to cease serving your people?" The Minbari seemed almost offended by the suggestion.

Gideon smiled and explained that in Earthforce retirement didn't imply infirmity. "I have served Earthforce for twenty-five years. If I only had myself to think about, I'd happily serve another twenty-five, but I have a family to consider. Marcus is over four years old now. I want him to have a more normal childhood than he can have here on the Excalibur, and Deborah and I want another child. I'm not happy with the idea of her being on this ship when she's pregnant. There are too many dangers. We've fought some close battles in the last couple of years. I don't want my wife and son exposed to those kind of risks any more, so I'm taking the option to retire from Earthforce now, and we're going home to Earth."

He took a deep breath and nodded at John and Luke. "I know that John, Luke and Lily have had similar discussions, but they've arrived at a different conclusion. They want to stay together here on the Excalibur, to continue to live as a family right here. It hasn't been easy for any of us making these decisions, but that's what we finally decided."

The Ranger nodded, solemnly. "I can understand your concern for your wife and child. What of her other sister? Will she stay here on the Excalibur or leave with you and your wife?" Trulann had become a friend of the Gideons over the years, and understood the complexities of their family ties.

The question was a good one, but Gideon didn't have an answer. "We don't know as yet. Angel hasn't decided. She can stay here, working in Medbay as she has done for the last three and a half years, and I know Luke will be pleased if she does. Or she can come back to Earth with Deborah and me. It's her decision, but she hasn't made it yet. There's no hurry. Deborah and I won't be leaving for another month."

Gideon kept his worries about Angel to himself. He and his wife had talked for many hours about her sister's present and future circumstances. Since Angel's brief affair with 'Jack' a month or so earlier, and his subsequent escape, the young witch had shut herself away from her friends and family. On the rare occasions when her sisters had persuaded her to emerge from her quarters, Angel had seemed depressed and listless. Even the news of Gideon's imminent retirement hadn't roused her from her melancholy.

When he and Deborah had suggested that she return to Earth with them, Angel had merely shrugged, saying that it didn't really matter if she stayed or left. In the weeks since Jack's departure, Angel had lost weight, and her family was becoming seriously concerned about both her physical and emotional well being.

Gideon took another deep breath. None of those concerns affected his current mission or this meeting. He continued, "Anyway, let's hear what job you've got in mind for us during this next month, shall we? A nice, quiet investigation of some tropical paradise would be good."

The Ranger smiled gently and shook his head. "Sadly, the assignment on which President Sheridan has asked me to brief you is about as far from a tropical paradise as it is possible to get." He stood and walked to the view screen, where he dropped a data crystal into a slot. The screen lit up with a view of a planet, taken from space.

The planet was white. Gideon narrowed his eyes and peered more closely. Actually, it was white on white. Pale clouds circled above a glacial surface. Shards of light pierced the clouds, as sunlight caught crystalline formations on the ground and reflected the light back up into space. It almost hurt to look at it, until Trulann adjusted a control, which reduced the brightness.

Luke murmured, "Looks like we won't be short of ice for our drinks for a while. If that's where we're going, I'd better read up on treatments for frost bite."

Gideon snorted. "If! What possible reason could Sheridan have for wanting us to go there? It's a wasteland, isn't it? A planet that cold can't support life, can it?"

Trulann nodded and pointed to a dark, narrow band that circled the equator. "Only in a very limited area. This planet is currently in the depths of an ice age that began a thousand years ago. The ice cap has expanded, absorbing most of the free water and reducing sea levels, until this land," he pointed to the darker shadow, "became exposed. Having been underwater for millennia, the land is very fertile, and the small population that remained after the onset of the ice age has moved here and is able to survive. Barely."

The Ranger made a further adjustment to the controls and an aura appeared to enclose the planet. "The planet is surrounded by an unusual magnetic field that distorts most of our communication devices. It also makes transfer from orbiting ships to the surface..." Trulann paused, searching for an appropriate word, "interesting." Gideon didn't find his eventual choice very reassuring.

"How interesting? Any idea what causes that field? Is it natural or created?"

The Ranger answered the second question. "The field appears related to the unusual mineral content of the planet's crust. The variations in density of that mineral create variations in the field, which in turn create turbulence in the atmosphere, and also affect engine performance. This can lead to uneven surges and drains of power during transit. I think the best word to describe the ride would be 'bumpy'."

Gideon heard John mutter, "Oh wonderful. Fasten your seat belts." The Captain smiled. His XO had never enjoyed turbulent shuttle transfers. While John didn't exactly suffer from motion sickness, he had been known to lose his lunch when a ride got too rough. That was one reason he avoided co-piloting when his Captain was at the controls of a shuttle. Gideon's approach to piloting could be similar to his approach to command. Eccentric.

"I take it you're happy for me to lead this landing party then, Commander?" Gideon gave his XO a wicked grin. He knew that John didn't like the cold much, either.

"Oh, you're quite welcome to this one, Captain! There are parts of me that I'd prefer not to get frozen off, thank you!" John's grin was just as wicked.

Luke's murmur was barely audible. "There are parts of you that Lily and I prefer unfrozen, too!"

Gideon cleared his throat and brought the meeting back under control. "So, we have an ice-ball that's difficult to communicate with and tricky to land on. Why are we bothering? What are the inhabitants like?"

"I'll come on to the reason why President Sheridan wishes you to investigate in a few moments. In answer to your second question, the inhabitants are humanoid, in fact very like humans in appearance if not physiology. The main difference you will notice is that they are rather less susceptible to cold than humans or Minbari."

Ignoring Gideon's mutter of, "They'd have to be," Trulann went on to describe the more obvious differences between the inhabitants and humans, while passing a data pad with more detailed information to Luke Raven. When the Ranger had finished his description, Gideon saw that the doctor's head had dropped as he studied the pad in more detail.

The Captain half smiled to himself, knowing that they wouldn't get much more from Luke for a while. The doctor was engrossed in the medical data Trulann had given him.

"So let's go back to my first question, Trulann. Why are we being sent to this balmy paradise? No doubt it's destined to become the fashionable new resort spot of the galaxy. I'm surprised the Disneyplanet people aren't there ahead of us."

The sarcasm was wasted on the Minbari, who answered briefly. "Quantium 40. In large quantities."

That made Gideon sit up and take notice. Quantium 40 was one of the rarest minerals in the galaxy and it was essential for the manufacture of jumpgates. Fifteen years earlier, supplies of the mineral had become so scarce that the Earth Alliance's jumpgate construction activities had been severely curtailed. A large find by a private prospector back in 2258 had allowed construction work to recommence, but the ISA was always on the look out for new sources.

The Captain nodded. "Makes sense that the ISA would want a treaty with these people. I assume we want mining rights?" The Ranger nodded his agreement.

Gideon asked, "Do we have any clues to what they might want in exchange?"

Trulann shook his head. "We know they don't have the technology to extract the mineral themselves. Their technology is..." the Ranger paused, again searching for an appropriate word, "inconsistent. They are quite advanced in some respects, weapons for example, but in areas such as mining and manufacturing, they are rather primitive. The mineral deposits are buried deep under the ice, and are inaccessible to the inhabitants. What President Sheridan wishes you to do is to ascertain the best way of getting the ISA access to the Quantium 40. This may involve the simple provision of appropriate technology or the inhabitants may

wish to become members of the ISA. The latter would be difficult. Their society has not evolved to the point where we would normally consider them for membership, but you are empowered to negotiate terms."

The Ranger went on to describe the structure of the societies on the planet. "There are two main groupings sharing the only inhabitable land mass. The dominant group is matriarchal and theocratic."

Gideon sighed. Priestesses. Not his favorite people. He smiled to himself, wondering if he could send his wife down to negotiate. Deborah would make short work of any matriarchs. The Captain would give odds on a witch against a priestess any day. He allowed his thoughts to wander to consider what might happen if he took all three witches with him. The priestesses wouldn't stand a chance.

Shaking his head, Gideon brought his attention back to the subject in hand. "And the other group?" With his luck they'd be rabidly militaristic.

"The smaller group gives every appearance of being democratic. They have rebelled and split away from the matriarchs, seeming determined to conduct their own affairs independent of the theocracy existing in the main group. They appear much more suitable for membership of the ISA, but..." The Ranger again trailed off, leaving his sentence incomplete.

"But?" Gideon prompted him. "What's the catch?"

Trulann shook his head. "The team investigating this group included one very low level telepath." The Ranger half-smiled as he nodded in Matheson's direction. "In human terms, she would have been a P2 or 3, barely able to carry out surface scans. When introduced to the leader of the 'rebel' group, she became uncomfortable. She could not define the source of her discomfort, but would only say that there was something wrong, some unseen and unexplained presence at the meeting. We have no further information on this."

Gideon sighed, wondering what he'd done to deserve this sort of send off. "And I thought you'd give me something nice and easy as my final mission. Instead, you give me a planet with a hostile environment, buried treasure, and two conflicting groups, one run by priestesses and the other complete with 'unseen forces'. Thanks, Trulann, you've made my day."

The Ranger showed the merest hint of a smile as he assured the Captain, "You are most welcome, Captain Gideon. I cannot think of anyone more appropriate to command this mission."

The Captain narrowed his eyes as he stared at Trulann. He was sure he'd just had his leg pulled by the Minbari, but he decided to leave it. He wasn't sure he wanted to know exactly what Trulann had meant by that.

"OK, we'll see what we can do. Just one more thing. What's this place called?"

Luke Raven had barely been listening to the exchange between Gideon and Trulann. The medical data provided by the Ranger was fascinating and the doctor had been completely distracted by it. The sound of a word brought his attention back to the meeting.

"Inesbitrin."

Luke looked up at the Ranger in surprise. "Pardon? What was that name again?"

The Ranger repeated the name, and Luke started to laugh. He became aware that the others were looking at him curiously, and John sent a mild telepathic query.

[/What's so funny? The Minbari aren't renowned for their sense of humor, and Matthew doesn't see the joke, either.] The warning in John's tone sobered Luke quickly.

He hastened to explain. "OK, you know that before I went to live on Deneb IV, I was brought up on Earth?" Gideon nodded, so Luke continued. "More specifically, I was brought up in England, in a place called Glastonbury. I grew up hearing about all the legends of the area, mainly centering around King Arthur and the Round Table. Now, in that context do any of you recognize the name Trulann just gave us, or one very close to it, anyway?"

The others all shook their heads and Luke snorted in contempt. "You're all illiterate ignoramuses. Ynisvitrin was another name for the Isle of Avalon." The men around the table still looked blank, so Luke continued, "The place where King Arthur went. His last resting place. With his sword, Excalibur."

Luke watched, as Gideon took in what he had just said and started to smile. The smile spread wider across his face until he could no longer control it and he began laughing. When the Captain was eventually able to speak coherently, he said, "Let's just hope it's not the last resting place for the Captain of the Excalibur."

"Won't go!" The words were a shriek as Gideon entered his quarters. For one moment, he almost turned around and left again, then he decided that it would be unfair to leave his wife to cope with yet another temper tantrum from their son. They were becoming almost daily occurrences, and Deborah's patience was wearing thin. [Any thinner and it would be transparent!]

The Captain could hear the tone of his wife's voice, if not her words, and it seemed she and Marcus were on a collision course again. Time to break up the fight before things got really nasty. Gideon plastered a false smile on his face and walked through to his son's bedroom, where the combatants were squared off for battle. He heard the tail end of Deborah's speech as he entered, and if her teeth had been any more gritted, they'd have shattered.

*"Marcus, we've been over this. We *are* leaving the Excalibur. We *are* going back to Earth. You *will* like it when we get there." As a series of commands, her little speech had a lot going for it. As a way of reassuring a stubborn four year old, it left a lot to be desired.*

"Won't!" Marcus' response was hardly original. He'd been using that word a lot since his parents had told him that they were leaving the only home he'd ever known.

Gideon intervened before his wife could respond. "How's my favorite wife and son today then?"

The combatants turned and glared at him. Two blond heads, curls almost standing on end with the electric tension they'd created between them, and four golden brown eyes fixed themselves on a new victim. Deborah and Marcus were both kneeling on the floor of Marcus' bedroom, a pile of toys next to them. Gideon realized that he'd walked in on an attempt to get Marcus to cull some of his playthings before the move. Now the Captain was certain he should have gone back to work after seeing Trulann off.

The Minbari Ranger hadn't stayed long after the briefing, declining the invitation to stay for lunch and quizzing Gideon closely on their bullet car ride back to the landing bay. Trulann seemed unable to accept Gideon's decision to retire. He kept going on about the duty of the individual to serve in the job they were best suited to carry out, and how Gideon was perfectly matched to his current occupation. The Minbari seemed almost offended at the idea of the Captain leaving. In the Ranger's view, it appeared to be a kind of desertion.

By the time Gideon had got Trulann to the landing bay, the Captain's patience had worn nearly as thin as his wife's. He was actually glad to see the back of the

Ranger. He'd decided to visit his quarters on his way back to the bridge, to talk to Deborah about the mission. Looking at his wife and son, kneeling on the floor glaring at him, Gideon wished he hadn't bothered. [Too late now!]

Swooping down, he picked Marcus up and threw him over his shoulder. This was something his son usually loved and it was guaranteed to put him into a good mood. Not today. The child shrieked and screamed to be put down, yelling that he didn't want to go, he wanted to stay here, he wanted Dasha and Flynn, he wanted Half-Ted, he wanted his Auntie Angel, Uncle John, Uncle Luke, Auntie Lily, Uncle G'Tan, anyone but his horrible, cruel, unkind parents.

Gideon realized that Marcus thought he was being physically carried away from his home, and quickly dropped his son on his bed. He tried to smile, saying, "Hey! Calm down! I wasn't taking you anywhere, I was just..."

Marcus wasn't listening. He grabbed his pillow and hid behind it, shrieking at the top of his voice that he wanted to stay, that he didn't want to leave his home and his friends. He started sending waves of panic, anger and fear, and Gideon had to control himself sternly, so as not to be affected by the child's projections. Deborah sighed and tried to reach out for him, but Marcus was hysterical, refusing to be comforted or calmed.

It took both his parents to still his struggles, and Deborah sending soothing waves of comfort and love, before the little boy started to calm. He eventually allowed his father to take him in his arms and cuddle him, comforting him, telling him it was going to be all right. But it wasn't. Gideon knew that. They would go through this again, as they had gone through it before, until Marcus accepted the fact that they were leaving behind everything he knew and loved.

As he held his son, rocking him in his arms, Gideon wondered whether he was doing the right thing. He was doing this for Deborah and Marcus, because they were the most important things in his life and he could no longer bear that they should be at risk. He wanted a normal life for them, safe on a planet, where no one would throw missiles at them, or try to hurt them. Where Marcus could play in the open air, go to a normal school, and have friends other than his cousins. Was that such a bad thing to want? Did wanting it make Gideon such a monster? He knew that in his son's eyes it did.

Marcus' sobs eventually subsided and the little boy fell asleep in his father's arms. Gideon looked at his wife, who sat on the bed next to them, still projecting waves of love and comfort.

"That didn't go well." Gideon sighed.

Deborah shrugged her shoulders. "It went as well as it has done every day since we told him. Let him sleep for a bit. He's exhausted himself."

Gideon stood, holding his son while his wife turned back the covers, then lowering the sleeping child to the bed. He kissed Marcus gently on the forehead, whispering, "I love you," then straightened and followed his wife from the bedroom.

Demon turned as Matthew closed the bedroom door behind them, feeling his sorrow and guilt, but also feeling his determination. He was convinced that this was the right thing for all of them, but Demon wasn't so sure. She understood why Matthew wanted to go back to Earth, why he wanted her and Marcus to be safe, especially now they had decided to have another child, but understanding didn't necessarily mean agreement.

She had gone along with Matthew's plans at first, because this had seemed something he really wanted to do. Demon had felt his determination, and his fear at the prospect of losing her and Marcus, after the attack from the alternate universe. The invaders breaching the Excalibur and nearly breaking into their quarters had rocked Matthew badly. He'd never before felt so helpless to protect his wife and child. Demon had been able to sense his resolve never to let that happen again.

Since that time, she had felt Matthew's feelings shifting. The determination was still there, but so were regret, a sense of loss, and another fear. Demon wasn't a telepath, so she didn't know exactly what caused this feeling, but she sensed that her husband was apprehensive of his future. He didn't know quite what he was going to do with himself when he retired, and he was worried.

Demon was worried too. She didn't care where she lived, as long as Matthew was with her. She didn't care what risks she ran, as long as she could be by his side. Their experiences on Centauri Prime and afterwards had strengthened the bond between them, to the point where Demon knew that she couldn't live without her husband. What she wanted above everything was for him to be happy, and she wasn't sure that the course he had set for himself was going to achieve that.

As she turned, Matthew held out his arms and Demon moved into them, laying her head on his shoulder, putting her arms around his waist, and hugging him to her. She felt his arms around her, his hands stroking her back and hair. She relaxed her control over her feelings just long enough to send a wave of her love,

letting her husband feel what she felt for him.

Matthew chuckled, whispering into her hair, "That feels damned good. What did I do to deserve it?"

Demon looked up into his face and smiled. "You did your knight in shining armor act, and came riding in to save me from the dragon. It may have been only four years old and shaped like a little boy, but it was breathing fire and ready to cremate me."

Matthew laughed again. "Remind me to install a fire extinguisher. I take it the clear out of his toys set him off?"

*Demon nodded. "I was just about to throw him *and* his toys out of the airlock when you arrived. He'll never know how close he came to breathing vacuum today!" She sighed deeply. "Matthew, he's very frightened by all this. He's scared of leaving everything and everyone he's ever known behind. Are you sure..."*

Matthew cut her off before she could finish her sentence. "We've been over this. Sooner or later, we'll have to leave here, and Marcus will have to start living a more normal life. It's never going to get easier, Deborah, and if he starts picking up on any doubts you might have..."

Demon could sense her husband's impatience and irritation, but she interrupted him nevertheless, laying her fingers on his lips. "I will never let Marcus sense my doubts, you know that. I'll support you totally on this, it's just..." Her words ran down as Matthew let go of her and turned away, throwing himself into the chair behind his desk, creating a barrier between them as he glared up at her. Demon felt his irritation turn to anger.

"Just what? I thought you agreed with me. This is not a safe place to bring up a child and it's not a safe place for you to be pregnant. Your contraceptive shot will be wearing off any time now. You're using the scanner every morning to check if you're ovulating. I won't have you pregnant on this ship!"

Demon could tell Matthew's temper was fraying, and she hurried to soothe him, laughing softly. "Better tie a knot in it then, lover. You know damn well that I'm Myrtle the fertile turtle and you're Captain One Shot where getting me pregnant is concerned."

Matthew tried to keep a straight face, then burst out laughing, saying, "I seem to remember we did it rather more than once on that first visit." He then reached out and grabbed Demon's hand, pulling her toward him and down, until she sat

across his knees. He lifted his hand to her chin and tilted it, then kissed her deeply, passionately, creating a warm pool of lust in Demon's center.

When they finally broke for air, Matthew looked into her eyes and said quietly, "I love you very much, and I want to be with you every day for the rest of a very long life. I want our son and daughter," he stroked her belly gently as he spoke, "to be safe and happy. I'll do whatever I have to, to make that happen."

Demon sensed his love and devotion, mixed with his determination, and she put her fears to one side. Matthew had made up his mind that retiring was the right thing to do, and nothing was going to change it now.

Gideon sighed and gently pushed his wife off his knees, smiling at her. "OK, there are a few other things I want to talk to you about, and I thought I'd pick up some lunch while I was here. Do we have any of that chocolate cheesecake left over from last night, or did you and Marcus pig out on it this morning?"

*Deborah smiled as she stood and swatted his arm. "Matthew, you are *not* just having chocolate cheesecake for lunch. I'll make you a sandwich."*

They walked through to the main living area together, while Gideon protested that he could get his own lunch. Deborah went and curled up on the sofa while he put coffee on to brew, and prepared a sandwich. As he moved around the kitchen area, Gideon asked, "Did you see Angel this morning? Is she any nearer a decision?"

Deborah shook her head and sighed. "She's still saying she doesn't know what she wants to do, and doesn't care. Matthew, I swear that between her and Marcus, I'll have my first white hairs before you retire."

Gideon laughed as he brought a tray into the living area, placing it on the low coffee table in front of the sofa, then sitting next to his wife and passing her a mug of coffee. "As long as it's on your head, that's fine. I plan on inspecting the other end closely, and if I find any white hairs there, I'm plucking them."

*Deborah's throaty chuckle left him in no doubts as to her approval of his proposal, then she sighed again and continued. "I really think she ought to come with us. That agent--the one Luke sent the crystal to--has been in touch again. He was *very* impressed by Angel's performance in the ship's production of Hamlet that Luke directed last year. She really was incredible as Ophelia." Deborah took a sip of her coffee and went on, "The agent says he has a couple of parts he'd*

really like Angel to test for. I've had him checked out and he seems genuine enough. I think that sort of distraction is just what Angel needs to help her get over Jack."

Gideon finished his sandwich and said nothing. There was nothing to say that hadn't already been said. For a while, he'd hoped that Angel would be happy with Jack. The Captain had worked hard to put aside his own jealousy, for once putting Angel's happiness ahead of his own desires. He was well aware that he'd been selfish as far as Angel was concerned, and that he could never give her what she needed most--his undivided love.

Sipping on his coffee, Gideon looked at Deborah and smiled to himself. This woman would always come first and last for him. No matter how he felt toward Angel, no matter how much he loved her, he would always love Deborah. So he'd pushed his own love for Angel aside and cheered for her when she'd met another version of himself, a man she could love and who could give her all his love in return.

But it hadn't worked out that way. For some reason, Angel and Jack had fought, and Jack had left. Gideon had asked the Rangers to keep a discrete eye out for Jack, and to let him know if Jack was ever spotted, but the man had vanished without trace. Which left Gideon, Deborah and the rest of Angel's family trying to help her through the painful aftermath.

After a few moments of silence, Deborah sighed again, putting her mug down on the coffee table and asking, "Have you heard from President Sheridan yet? I know you hoped he'd contact you today."

Gideon shook his head. "No, not a thing. I wish he'd get on with it. It's unsettling for the crew to know that I'm leaving, without knowing who's going to take command when I'm gone."

Deborah's face showed her anxiety as she asked, "It has to be John, hasn't it? He wouldn't give command to anyone else, would he?"

It was a good question. Gideon had strongly recommended John as his successor as Captain of the Excalibur, citing his familiarity with the ship, the crew and the mission. But Sheridan could ignore that recommendation if he chose. He could put anyone he wanted in command of the Excalibur. He could choose a Captain from any race in the ISA, and Gideon could do nothing about it. He only hoped that if John didn't succeed him as Captain, then the ship's new commander would have some sympathy and understanding of telepaths.

Gideon's greatest fear was that the new Captain would be a Minbari from the Warrior caste. They commanded all Minbari ships, other than the Ranger fleet, and such a choice was always possible, but it could be a disaster for John and his family. The Warriors would have no tolerance for John's family commitments, and could make his life miserable.

*Doubts ate away at Gideon, again making him question his decision to retire. Was he *really* doing the right thing? He shook those doubts away and smiled sadly at his wife, responding to her question at last.*

"I don't think so, but I can't be sure. You know how strongly I recommended John, but Sheridan will make his own choice. He may feel that putting a rookie Captain in command of the Excalibur is too much of a risk. He may want to put a more experienced commander in place. I don't think Sheridan is prejudiced against telepaths, but I don't know. I went through all this with John before I handed in my notice of retirement, and he insisted that he was willing to take the risk. I just hope to God that Sheridan does the right thing."

Deborah leaned forward, placing her coffee mug back on the table and taking his hand, squeezing it gently. Gideon felt a wave of love and calmness wash over him, and he lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it gently in appreciation.

Demon felt all of Matthew's doubts and anxieties, and wished there were more she could do to help him. She listened when he wanted to talk, and tried not to press when he didn't, but she knew how difficult this period was for her husband. Too many conflicting demands made every choice he could make seem like a bad one. The tall blonde squeezed Matthew's hand and projected her love and confidence in him.

He smiled sadly at her, then lifted her hand to kiss it gently. Then he took a deep breath and said. "None of this is why I came to see you. Not even lunch, although if you can dig out some of that cheesecake..." he trailed off and gave her a hungry puppy dog look, smiling in a way he knew she could never resist.

Demon laughed and rose from the sofa, moving into the kitchen area as she said, "I managed to save a sliver for you, although I had to fight off a small, ravenous dragon-boy to keep it safe." As she put the cheesecake on a plate she asked, "So what did you come to see me about?" She brought the plate back to the sofa where her husband sat, salivating.

Demon smiled to herself as she watched him attack the dessert. [It's usually me

he looks that hungry for. Maybe I'm losing my touch.] She knew she need never have any fears in that respect. Matthew came to her bed every night like a starving man finding food for the first time in weeks.

"Our mission. I may need your help." Matthew finished his cheesecake then went on to describe the planet and people they were to visit, and what they were supposed to achieve there.

Demon listened intently until he had finished, then asked, "So how can I help you?"

"If this bunch is anti-male, as is possible with a matriarchy, I may need a big strong woman to protect me." He grinned at Demon as she swatted his arm, then went on, "Seriously, if the matriarchy is a problem, I'll get Jackson to do the negotiating, but she's not that experienced yet. It would really help to have an empath sitting next to her, whispering in her ear, telling her when the other side is bluffing and when they're serious."

Demon nodded, working hard at not letting her feelings show. Her stomach was churning at the thought of going down to a planet again. She hadn't left the Excalibur since their visit to Centauri Prime, and while she knew she was going to have to get over her fears, she'd hoped to postpone that necessity until they arrived back at Earth.

Matthew's hand grasped hers gently, and Demon looked up to see him looking at her anxiously. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I know that leaving the ship wouldn't be your first choice, but..."

*Demon interrupted him, making the effort to smile. "But it would help ensure the success of the mission if I can get myself onto a shuttle and down to the planet's surface. Well, fortunately I don't get travel sick, so the bumpy ride won't bother me, but you'd better make sure I get a full set of thermals, because if my feet get cold, it's *your* butt I'm warming them on, buster!"*

Matthew laughed and pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly and whispering, "If your feet get cold, I'll rub them warm again, and if that doesn't work, you're welcome to warm them on any part of my anatomy you want."

Demon chuckled, "Promises, promises. Let's just make sure I don't get cold feet." She meant that in every sense of the words.

26th June 2273

Gideon stormed out of the landing bay, his face set into a glowering frown. He might not be a projecting empath like his wife, but the Captain was well aware that he was sending out waves of anger and hostility that anyone who saw him could feel. As a result, the crew parted in front of him like the Red Sea before Moses. Now if only he could call down a few plagues on the women on the planet below. A nice combination of frogs and boils perhaps.

Thoughts of just how he would like to see the priestesses cursed soothed Gideon's mind, as he strode onto the bullet car and flung himself onto a seat. He just wished he could find something that would soothe his stomach. He snapped an order for the car to take him to the bridge and sat back, thinking about his meeting with the High Priestess on the planet below.

The flight down in the shuttle had been unpleasant for everyone, and Gideon had not been pleased to discover that some of his best Marines got sick in that degree of turbulence. His own queasiness had been exacerbated when the Narns had started throwing up. He'd barely hung onto his breakfast, and had welcomed the icy blast of fresh air that had entered the shuttle when they flung the door open on arrival.

Standing at the top of the ramp, Gideon had stared down at the group of women waiting for him below. They were tall and athletically built, varying in age from what in humans would have been early twenties, up to the woman standing in the center of the group, who looked in her sixties or seventies. They were very human in appearance, and if they had been human, Gideon would have thought of them as being of Mediterranean origin. Dark hair, even in the oldest of them, dark eyes and olive toned skin gave them that appearance, and there had been plenty of that skin on display, particularly among the younger women in the group. The dusky skin tones were set off by the silver colored jewelry that most of the women wore. Ears, noses, wrists and throats were all adorned with intricately sculpted pieces.

While the elders had worn long robes, the younger women had sported brief skirts and tightly fitted tunics. All the women had bare arms, seeming unaffected by the bitter cold. Gideon had known from the instruments in the shuttle that the outside temperature was several degrees below freezing, and the wind chill factor made it feel much colder. He himself had been wearing thermally insulated pants and jacket, and even so, he had shivered in the cold wind that had swept into the shuttle.

Very much aware that he probably didn't look his best, as he was both shivering

with cold, and still pale green from the bumpy ride, the Captain had descended to meet the waiting women. He'd noted that there was not a single male in view. G'Tan had marched down behind him, staying near to his shoulder, followed closely by the four Marines they had selected for the mission.

Gideon had bowed politely to the High Priestess at the center of the group, carefully pronouncing the words of greeting he had learned in her language. She had answered in flawless, unaccented English.

"You are male. You do not carry the Light. Does your President wish to insult us by sending such an emissary?"

That had been the high point of the interview. Standing, shivering in the bitterly cold wind, Gideon had done his best to stay polite and explain his mission. It had taken everything he had not to let his teeth chatter, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that the combination of green skin, red nose and blue lips had done little to impress the Priestess. It seemed that his charming hazel brown eyes hadn't been enough to offset the other color clashes.

When Gideon had finished speaking, she had glared at him. She had been able to glare him straight in the eye as she was much the same height as the Captain. "Tell your President to send us an envoy who can tolerate our climate, and who has the strength to speak to us without quaking in fear. Tell her to send us a woman." Then she had turned on her heel and swept away with her entourage, leaving Gideon seething behind her.

He had watched as the group returned to the building behind them, a building that in many ways reminded him of the castle on Eriadne, but this place was far more forbidding. Black walls rose from black rocks, topped by spiky battlements. The walls were pierced by a single entrance, itself filled with a gate topped with spikes. The gates had opened to allow the Priestess and her train through then slammed shut behind them, leaving the Captain and his party standing outside in the desolate dawn.

G'Tan's voice had murmured in his ear, "That went well. I wonder how President Sheridan will feel about having been promoted to the status of 'woman'?"

Gideon had bitten his lip to prevent a smile, then turned and waved his team back to the shuttle. "Deleenn would certainly be pissed. Let's get out of here before we freeze our balls off and all earn that promotion."

On the ride back to the Excalibur, he'd made certain that those Marines who had thrown up on the way down were seated as far from him as he could get them,

then he'd sat and done something in which he was galactic gold medallist class. He'd brooded. It looked as if this was going to be one of his more challenging missions.

The Captain was still seething when they had arrived back on the Excalibur, his temper not improved by finding that those Narns who hadn't thrown up on the way down, had proceeded to do so on the way back. By the time they had gotten back, even the pilot had been sick. Only Gideon and G'Tan had kept the contents of their stomachs to themselves, and the Captain thought that the Narn Marine Sergeant was looking a little green around the spots. Gideon had called ahead and asked Deborah, John Matheson and Lieutenant Christina Jackson to meet him in the conference room.

The bullet car ride calmed Gideon a little, and at least gave time for his stomach to settle, so he could now be sure that he wasn't going to throw up himself. He'd come damned close a couple of times on the journey back, and only pride had stopped him joining in the general wave of vomiting. That and the ability to clamp his jaw tightly shut.

Arriving at the stop for the bridge, Iron-jaw Gideon rose and strode out of the bullet car, doing his best to look like the commander of the flagship of the ISA fleet, not the shivering, sickly wreck he felt like inside.

John Matheson watched Demon rise in concern as the Captain entered the conference room. John had to admit that he'd rarely seen Matthew look so sick. His skin was pale and his lips were blue, but he shook off his wife's worried comments, with a brusque, "I'm fine. Just a rough ride and an even rougher audience."

Demon helped Matthew out of his insulated jacket, but John could see that his Captain still shivered occasionally. [He must be chilled through.] The Commander felt a moment's guilt at his own relief that he wouldn't have to suffer the ride down to the planet or the bitter cold waiting there. Perhaps he should volunteer to take Matthew's place, perhaps he should suggest that the Captain should stay on the ship. John decided to wait and hear Matthew's report before making his offer.

Jackson had poured a mug of hot coffee while Matthew had been getting his jacket off, and brought it over with a smile. The Captain took it gratefully, wrapping his still shaking hands around it. Demon helped steady his hands while he took his first sips, and John watched as color started to creep back into

Matthew's cheeks.

After a few moments of silence, while the Captain warmed himself inside and out, he sighed and said, "In case you hadn't guessed, it's cold down there. And the ride is even bumpier than we'd been told. This one is going to be fun."

John listened as Matthew described his meeting with the High Priestess. Not the most auspicious start to a mission. He wondered briefly what she had meant by her comment about Matthew not carrying the light. Probably a reference to him being a mere male. John smiled to himself, knowing that his Captain would find such discrimination intensely irritating.

Matthew hated prejudice of any kind, as he had demonstrated repeatedly in his friendship with John. No other Captain had been willing to take on a telepath, but when Matthew Gideon had heard that young Ensign Matheson was unplaced on graduation from Earthforce academy, he had immediately requested that the telepath be transferred to his command. In that one moment, Matthew had earned John's respect, loyalty and friendship for life.

When Matthew finished his description of the people and place, he turned to Christina Jackson and smiled ruefully. "I hate to drag you down there, and I know how much you hate the cold, but I think you're the best person for the mission, Chris."

John watched his protégé carefully. He had been working with Jackson since she'd arrived on the Excalibur, only a couple of months before they'd completed their mission to find a cure for the Drakh plague. John had seen Jackson's potential, particularly after her outstanding performance during the Drakh attack on the Excalibur on their way back to Earth with the cure. The telepath had encouraged her, helped her, become her mentor, in the same way Matthew had done for him. He'd had no hesitation in recommending her for the position of Second Officer, and he'd been delighted when Matthew had accepted that proposal. As he'd expected, Jackson had never given him a moment's regret about his recommendation. John knew that she was ready for promotion to First Officer. He just hoped that...

The First Officer pushed that thought aside and listened closely as Jackson responded to her Captain with a smile, and a blush that was barely visible on her dark skin. "Thank you, Captain. I'll certainly do my best, but I think I'm going to check to see if our Quartermaster has some warmer clothing than you had."

Gideon grinned back at her. "Damn right. Next time we go down there, I'm

wearing thermal socks and long johns."

*Demon snorted her amusement, murmuring, "I must get a picture of *that!*" before whispering something in her husband's ear which brought even more color back to his cheeks. John wasn't sure, but he thought he heard something about her wanting to make sure Matthew's assets remained unfrozen. He suppressed a smile and listened as Matthew turned to his wife.*

"You may want to check the Quartermaster's supplies yourself, as I'd really like you to come back down with us." Matthew took Demon's hand and squeezed it. John watched and realized that the request came as no surprise to Demon. While the tall blonde could conceal her feelings completely when she wanted, she relaxed around friends, and her discomfort was visible.

She smiled gently at her husband and John could see her golden eyes almost glowing with her affection for him, as she replied, "If you need me, I'll be there."

John knew this wouldn't be easy for Demon. She had suffered badly after their visit to Centauri Prime, and they had all seen how she had avoided leaving the ship since. He had to agree with Matthew, though. Making Demon's empathic abilities available to Jackson could make all the difference to their mission, but there was an alternative.

John interjected quietly, before Matthew could continue. "I could go down there with Christina. The rules may restrict what I can do, but they at least let me get a feel for the atmosphere. And sometimes I can't help knowing when someone is telling the truth or not." That wasn't entirely true, as John could block completely if he tried, but Matthew didn't need to know that, and as John no longer had to answer to the Joneses, no one else would know either.

John told himself that whatever happened in the next month or so, he would never have to undergo interrogation by the Joneses again. If he was made Captain of the Excalibur on Matthew's retirement, he would still be under Sheridan's command, and would be exempt from the inspections. If he didn't, he would take his family somewhere the Joneses would never find them. John pushed those thoughts away, becoming aware that Demon had taken his hand and was squeezing it gently.

She smiled at him, looking him directly in the eye, her own golden brown eyes twinkling with amusement. She said nothing, but John heard her thought quite clearly in his head.

[/Fibber. You've been spending too much time around Matthew. He's a bad

influence.】

John suppressed a smile, turning his head to avoid Demon's gaze and watching his Captain shake his head. "Won't work, John. They'd dismiss you as a mere weak male." Matthew grinned, but John could tell the Captain had been annoyed by the Priestess' attitude.

Matthew turned to Demon and took her hand again, squeezing it gently and looking anxiously into her eyes. "Are you sure? It would help a lot, but you don't have to do this."

Demon smiled back at her husband, her eyes glowing again with her feelings for him. "You don't think I'm going to let you go down there without me again, do you? If they're so short of men, they may decide to keep you. I'd better come along and make sure they keep their hands to themselves," Demon's gentle smile turned into an evil grin, "or they'll find themselves handless."

Matthew laughed and lifted his wife's hand to his lips. "Let's just hope you scare them as much as you scare me." He looked across to John, saying, "You have command, John. Mind the store until we get back."

Demon held her sobbing son close to her chest, as she knelt on the landing bay floor. His wails of dismay echoed around the large area, affecting everyone standing there. His words were reinforced through her link with his mind, and she could feel the depth of his distress as he projected his emotions.

"Don't go, Mummy! Please, don't leave me. I'll be good, I'll tidy my room, I won't be bad any more, but don't leave me behind!"

It took everything Demon had not to break down and sob with her son, as she hugged him tightly. She sent through their link, *【I'll only be gone for a little while. I'm not leaving you, Marcus. I'm coming back. I'll never leave you.】* At the same time, she spoke the words aloud, and sent wave after wave of love and calm, hoping to soothe the little boy's panic.

Matthew moved to kneel behind Marcus, putting his arms around them both, whispering into their son's ear. "It's OK, Marcus. We won't be gone for long, and Auntie Angel will be with you all the time."

Demon looked up to see her sister standing behind Matthew, smiling sadly down at the group kneeling on the floor. Angel still looked pale and drawn, but she was

doing her best to be cheerful for Marcus' sake. The little boy wriggled around between his parents and threw his arms around his father's neck, whimpering softly, "Please don't go, Daddy. I know I've been bad but I'll be good now, I promise." Tears streamed down his face as he clung to his father, and Demon watched as Matthew's eyes closed in pain at his son's distress.

Demon stroked her son's hair gently, whispering and sending at the same time. "We know you're a good boy, Marcus, and we love you. It won't be for long. Just a couple of days. And when we get back, we'll be starting on our way to Earth, where we'll always be together. Daddy will never have to go away again."

Marcus sniffed tearfully, then looked from his father to his mother and back. "Really? You won't have to go away again?" Marcus had always hated it when his father went off on landing parties for anything more than a few hours. The prospect of that never happening again cheered him instantly.

Matthew smiled and reached up to wipe away the little boy's tears. "Really. The three of us are going to live together in a nice house, with a big garden for you to play in, and I'll be there every day. We even hope," he looked over his shoulder and smiled at Angel, "that your Auntie Angel will come with us and stay with us, too."

Marcus looked up at Angel and smiled tentatively. "Will you, Auntie Angel? Please?"

Angel laughed softly, and joined the family kneeling on the landing bay floor. "How could I refuse my favorite boy in all the universe? If you want me to come with you, Marcus, of course I'll come." She reached out her arms and Marcus wriggled away from his parents to fling himself into her embrace.

Demon stood slowly, watching her sister hug Marcus tightly, then felt Matthew's arm move around her waist. His breath was warm on her ear as he whispered, "This may a good time for us to leave."

Demon nodded and sent through her link to her sister, [Take care of him for me, will you? Make sure he has Half-Ted with him in bed and...]

Her thoughts were interrupted by Angel's rueful mental laugh. [I know the drill. We've been through it a thousand times. Now you just take care of the Captain. Make sure you bring him back safe and sound, or Marcus will be really pissed.]

Demon smiled sadly at her sister, knowing that Marcus wouldn't be the only one upset if anything happened to Matthew. [I won't come home without him, don't

you worry.]]

With one last hug for her sister and her son, and one last wipe of Marcus' nose, she kissed them both and turned to follow her husband onto the shuttle, sending a wave of love back to the people she was leaving behind.

Standing at the top of the ramp leading down from the shuttle, Gideon decided that the temperature had increased a little during the hours he'd been away from the planet. The sun was now high in the sky, and he could feel the merest hint of warmth, as the sunlight touched his cheeks. This time around he'd come better prepared. Underneath the thermal pants and jacket, he wore insulated long johns, undershirt and socks. He had a woolen cap pulled down tightly over his ears and thick gloves on his hands. Having finally got the feeling back in his fingers and toes, the Captain had decided he'd rather they stayed attached to the rest of his body.

Turning to look at his wife, he couldn't help but smile. How had she managed to find a complete set of thermal clothes that not only fitted her like a glove, but were also black? Her low heeled boots lifted her to match Gideon's height exactly, and her long legs were encased in quilted black pants. She had her hands stuffed into the pockets of her insulated jacket, and her head was covered by a furry looking hat. It covered her hair completely, and a matching scarf covered the lower half of her face, leaving only her eyes showing.

Gideon smiled to himself, thinking that it was probably a good thing that no one could see more of Deborah's face. She had managed not to be sick on the bumpy ride down, but it had been touch and go. Luke had wanted to give them all shots with the latest motion sickness drugs before they'd left the Excalibur, but Deborah had refused. She'd told Luke that she didn't want drugs of any kind in her system when she and Gideon were trying for a baby. Despite Luke's assurances that the motion sickness shots were perfectly safe, Deborah had refused the drug. She had still looked a little green when she'd pulled on her hat and wrapped her scarf around her lower face and neck, before leaving the shuttle.

Deborah was scanning the horizon, taking in everything around her. There wasn't a lot to see. In the far distance, a glint of almost blinding white showed where the edge of the glaciers crept close to the inhabited land. Between that splinter of light and the castle in front of them, the land rolled in low hills of dark ground, interspersed with black, jagged rocks. The hills were covered with a low heather-like growth, which was apparently the main food supply for the inhabitants. Raising an image enhancer to his eyes, Gideon could see that this

growth was in flower, but the flowers ranged from a dark brown to dark gray in color.

"Believe it or not, this is the garden spot of Inesbitrin." Gideon kept his voice low as he spoke, not wanting the group now emerging from the castle to hear his comment.

The same High Priestess led the group, and her entourage was again made up of women of a variety of ages, shapes and sizes, but all still had bare arms, and many showed bare legs. Just the sight of them made Gideon want to shiver, but he stopped himself, needing no more comments about 'quaking in fear'. As the women arrived at the foot of the ramp, he led his party down, palming the door lock behind him. This time he'd piloted the shuttle down himself, with Jackson as co-pilot. He'd decided he didn't want to take any more people with him than necessary. [I don't need more people throwing up.]

As agreed earlier, Lieutenant Jackson immediately took control, saying, "I am the authorized representative of the Inter Stellar Alliance, empowered to negotiate on behalf of the President. Please arrange for me to meet with someone of equal authority and status." Gideon was proud of her. Not a quiver in her voice and arrogant as all hell. Just what these bitches needed.

The High Priestess reared her head back and waved imperiously. "You will negotiate with me. I am Latharr. Introduce your party."

Jackson nodded, polite but in no way subservient, and turned to Deborah. "This is Mrs. Deborah Gideon, my special adviser. You will accord her the same courtesy as you do me. Our honor guards are Ka'Van and No'Kar," she gestured toward the two large female Marines who stood immediately behind Deborah. "They will remain with us at all times. Captain Gideon and his honor guard, G'Tan, will also remain with our party." This was the tricky bit. Would the High Priestess swallow that demand?

Latharr narrowed her eyes and turned to Deborah. "The male shares your name. Is he your personal slave?"

Gideon clenched his teeth, biting back on the response he would have loved to give. He watched as Deborah stepped forward, pulling her scarf down to expose the lower part of her face, and moving until she was well within what humans would consider as the Priestess' personal space. From the tiny backwards movement the Priestess made, it seemed that she was uncomfortable with anyone standing so close, which was no doubt what Deborah intended.

*Deborah's voice was quiet but steely as she said, "He is my husband and my consort. If you wish these negotiations to go well for your people, I suggest that you treat all *my* people with respect, regardless of their gender." Standing toe to toe with the Priestess, Deborah glared her straight in the eye. Gideon could only hope that the aggressive approach would work.*

After a few seconds, during which neither woman moved, the Priestess took a step backwards and nodded. "It is not our way to treat inferiors as equals, but we can learn to respect the ways of others. Come, join us in our chambers. We have much to discuss."

*Gideon exhaled quietly and moved to his wife's side, following Jackson, with the three Narns bringing up the rear. As they walked into the castle, he whispered, "Your people? Since when are we *your* people? And when did I get to be your consort?" He grinned as she looked around and gave him one of her most superior looks.*

"You are all subjects of the Ice Queen Myrtle. Bow before me, mortal male."

Gideon suppressed a laugh and went on, "Good move. Did you know she was going to back down?"

Deborah's mouth moved into the tiniest of smiles as she murmured. "She was bluffing. She's desperate for these negotiations to succeed. I don't know what it is that she wants as yet, but she wants something from us." She turned her head just enough for Gideon to see her wink at him. "But I like the sound of that personal slave bit. Maybe we can try that sometime?"

Gideon snorted softly, knowing that his wife would pick up on his amusement at the idea. "Don't push your luck, Ice Queen. Remember, I know exactly how to heat you up and melt you."

Entering a large, high ceilinged hall, Demon was delighted to see the roaring fire in the hearth at the far end, but soon realized that it gave more light than heat. [This castle is nearly as cold inside as outside,] she thought, and tried not to shiver at the prospect of removing her hat and gloves.

She followed Jackson over to a table where food and drink had been laid out for their party, and using the scanner she had tucked in her pocket, she discretely ran it over everything. Turning to face her husband, concealing the scanner between their bodies, Demon glanced down at the reading then whispered to him, "All

safe. Nothing here will give us much nourishment, but it won't kill us either."

Matthew nodded and made a small hand gesture, which the others had been looking out for. A servant approached with a tray and Demon sighed, as she knew what she had to do next. She reluctantly pulled off her gloves then moved her hand to remove her hat. Shaking her hair loose around her shoulders, Demon became aware of the total silence in the hall, and realized that all the alien women were staring at her.

"What? What did I do?" Demon whispered to her husband, as she stared at the women. She could feel their amazement as they looked at her.

"It's your hair. I don't think they've ever seen a blonde before." Matthew whispered back, and Demon could feel his amusement.

Latharr stepped forward, reaching out to touch Demon's hair with the tip of her finger. Then she paused, asking, "May I?"

Demon smiled and nodded, watching the Priestess closely, wide open to her feelings, as the other woman ran her fingers along a lock of the golden hair.

Latharr whispered, "Soft. It is very soft. And bright." She suddenly looked up and stared into Demon's eyes, her own eyes widening. Demon could feel the Priestess' awe, an almost reverential devotion, as she gazed at the tall blonde. "You carry the Light. You are a true child of the Light. Welcome to our home." The Priestess bowed low, a gesture copied by every woman in the room.

Demon looked at all the women in surprise, then looked to see her husband smiling at her. He moved to her side and whispered, "Don't knock it, use it. Seems I'm not the only one who loves your hair."

Turning back to see the alien women all straightening up, Demon braced herself as they all surged toward her, all intent on touching her hair. "If any of them tries to take a sample, they're dead meat!" She whispered, smiling at the approaching women, ignoring Matthew's snort of amusement.

Gideon strode down the corridor toward the room where he'd been told his wife was waiting for him. G'Tan followed one step behind, as if attached by a tether to the Captain's side. The Narn Marine Sergeant hadn't moved from that position all day. Leaving the women to start negotiations, Gideon and G'Tan had returned to the shuttle, using the equipment on board to make contact with the

'rebels'.

While communication had been difficult, it seemed that once beneath the ionosphere, the magnetic field that blocked surface to orbit communication was less of a barrier. It had been slow work and frustrating, but Gideon had eventually been able to link into the landline connection the priestesses maintained with the rebel group, speaking to their leader and arranging to visit them the following day. At least that way he wasn't totally reliant on the priestesses for negotiating a deal for the Quantum 40.

Gideon had been relieved to find that the rebel leader, Moren, was male. Moren had assured the Captain that his group did not practice the discrimination against men that was characteristic of the priestesses. In fact, that discrimination had led them to rebel and set up a democratic, egalitarian society, as far from the priestesses as they could get. Unfortunately for them, given the limited inhabitable land on Inesbitrin, their base was only about 150 kilometers away.

While the terrain in between the two mutually hostile cultures was mountainous and heavily wooded, both sides had the equipment necessary to cross that terrain if they needed. Moren had told the Captain that an uneasy truce had been maintained for the last year, both sides having decided that they had too much to lose in an all out battle. He had then proceeded to invite Gideon to a conference at the rebel base, as he was keen to open negotiations with the ISA.

The Captain had accepted the invitation and advised Moren that he and G'Tan would arrive the following morning. Then he had returned to the castle, to find that negotiations had ended for the day and his Lieutenant and wife had been provided with accommodations for the night. Apparently, Deborah had left strict instructions that Gideon was to be escorted to her bedroom immediately on his return to the castle. Without those instructions, the Captain had a strong suspicion that he'd have been sent to sleep in the stables, or wherever the women usually sent 'mere males' for the night. He wondered for a moment where that might be, as since his arrival at the castle, he still hadn't set eyes on a man.

Arriving at the door to Deborah's room, Gideon was pleased to see No'Kar standing guard. The Narns had been given orders to act as bodyguards, and Gideon had no doubt as to their effectiveness in that role. Having checked that Jackson was also safely installed in her accommodations for the night, with Ka'Van on guard duty, the Captain wished G'Tan and No'Kar a good night, and entered his wife's room. Although he'd told them to get some rest, Gideon was almost certain that the two Narns would spend the night right outside the

door.

Glancing around the bedroom, Gideon wondered where his wife was. The room was lit by a number of candles in wall sconces, and a fire roared in a grate at the far end, but it did little to heat the place. The Captain could still see his breath in the air.

Moving in from the door, Gideon first noticed a neat pile of black clothes on a chair by the fire. He smiled as he realized that Deborah must have left them there, to try and keep them warm overnight. Turning to examine the room more carefully, the Captain then noticed a raised platform in the corner, on top of which was heaped a pile of furs. Was it his imagination, or had those furs just moved?

Smiling, he walked to the corner and spoke quietly. "There's a rumor that I may have a wife in here, somewhere. I didn't know we were playing hide and seek, though."

A hand emerged from under the furs, and the edge moved back just far enough for him to see the top of Deborah's head and her eyes.

"Get your butt in this bed, buster. My feet are cold and need warming."

Gideon laughed and blew her a kiss, then stripped quickly, yanking the furs back and sliding under them before he could get too cold. Deborah immediately slid across the bed and wrapped herself around him, grumbling that he was useless as a bed-warmer, as he was colder than she was. She was right, and Gideon luxuriated in the soft warmth of her body wrapped around his. He pulled the furs almost completely over their heads and hugged her tightly for a moment, enjoying the movement of her very warm hands and feet all over his body.

After a few moments of silent bliss, Gideon kissed Deborah's ear and whispered, "I think we need a discussion on military discipline. Don't let this Ice Queen business go to your head. 'Buster' is not a suitable form of address for your commanding officer."

Deborah's whole body vibrated with laughter and she blew a raspberry against his shoulder. Her hands moved down his body and Gideon groaned with pleasure as her warm fingers started to stroke his thighs and balls. She kissed her way along his shoulder, up his neck, until she reached his ear, where she gently sucked on the lobe for a moment, before whispering, "Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Permission to

give my commanding officer a blow job, Sir."

Gideon groaned again as Deborah's hand started stroking his stiffening cock, her fingers gently grasping and releasing, then running up and down his shaft. He barely gasped out the words, "Permission to blow," before her head moved down his body.

Deborah worked her way down Gideon's chest, kissing, licking, sucking each nipple in turn, never stopping the movement of her hand on his cock and balls. When she finally kissed the tip of his penis, Gideon couldn't help lifting his hips upward, desperate for the warm, wet haven of her mouth around him. She teased him for a while, moving the very tip of her tongue around the head of his cock, probing, licking, before enclosing his shaft in her mouth. She sucked gently for a moment, then released him again, to lick the length of him, moving her mouth to suck each of his balls in turn. Gideon moved his hand to his cock, grasping it firmly, moving his hand in time with the movement of Deborah's mouth on his balls. He knew he couldn't last much longer and was almost relieved when Deborah moved his hand to one side, and took his shaft into her mouth again.

This time she moved lower and lower, taking him in deeper and deeper, working her lips and tongue around him until Gideon knew that he was going to come. He thrust his hips upwards, feeling his shaft hitting the back of Deborah's throat, but just as he was about to explode into orgasm, she moved away.

Gideon groaned in dismay. "Oh, fuck it, Deborah, don't stop now!" He couldn't believe she would take him so close to the edge then deny him release. He felt her laughter, as she kissed the tip of his cock, then she moved up to lie alongside him, whispering in his ear again.

"I don't want to waste a drop. I have a little egg that needs fertilizing, so you'd better not come until you're inside me."

Gideon froze, then pulled the covers back down until he could see Deborah's face in the candlelight. She was smiling up at him, and the soft glow made her look more beautiful to him than ever before.

"You're ovulating?" He whispered, almost in awe.

Deborah smiled and nodded. "That's partly why I brought the scanner down with me. I knew it was due any time now. Want to make a baby?"

Gideon laughed aloud, then grabbed her by the shoulders and rolled her onto her

back. He moved quickly to lie on top of her and stared down into her eyes, grinning as he whispered, "Spread 'em, Ice Queen Myrtle. You are about to be royally screwed. You're going to get fucked like you've never been fucked before."

He felt Deborah's legs shift beneath him as she opened herself to him, lifting her knees until they were high above his elbows. Gideon moved his arms until he had them hooked under her knees, positioning her carefully where he could enter her in one smooth stroke, and achieve maximum penetration. Deborah's breathing accelerated as he moved her into the position he wanted her, and he knew that she was as eager to have him inside her, as he was to enter her.

Gideon paused, the tip of his cock just making contact with the wet heat of her vagina. He looked down at Deborah's face, as she lay back against the pillows, her hair spread around her like a cloak. Her eyes were dark with passion, her lips moist where her tongue flickered out to wet them. The Captain leaned down and kissed her, gently, tenderly, passionately, whispering as he entered her, "I love you."

Lying in her husband's arms, Demon sighed with contentment. Matthew had just lifted her to a level of pleasure unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. Perhaps it was knowing that they were making love, not just to give each other pleasure, not even to express their love for each other, but to make a new life. The act of love had been imbued with new meaning, which had transcended their previous experiences.

Demon turned her head to kiss her husband's shoulder, smiling as she whispered, "So how does Captain One Shot feel right now?"

Matthew chuckled, his arm tightening around Demon's shoulders as he lay on his back with his eyes closed. "Damned good, since you're asking. But Captain One Shot thinks that he should make sure he hits the target. So maybe a little later, he should take aim and fire again."

Demon laughed softly. "Keep firing shots like that and you'll have to carry me into those negotiations tomorrow, because I sure as hell won't be able to walk."

Matthew chortled again, turning his head to kiss her gently on the forehead, then laughing as he asked, "I'm assuming from the way you reacted that Ice Queen Myrtle enjoyed herself, too? I wonder what the priestesses will make of your projections tonight. That should have thawed the frozen bitches."

Demon sighed deeply. "I wish I could believe it would change their attitude toward men. Matthew, this society is totally warped."

She went on to explain what she had learned. Latharr had taken Demon and Jackson on a tour of the castle, during which time they had seen no men at all. On returning to the main hall, Demon had asked about it. Latharr had looked mildly offended, then explained that they kept very few men, and those only for breeding purposes.

"Matthew, they have equipment that enables them to select the sex of their children, and they select mostly females. They use artificial insemination to ensure that the contact between males and females is minimized. They treat their men like animals. It's disgusting. Do we really have to deal with these women?"

Matthew sighed. "Maybe not. I'm going to meet with the rebels tomorrow. Maybe we can strike a deal with them. But in the meantime, it would help if you and Jackson can keep our options open here. I know I'm asking a lot, but can you hang on in there? Keep them talking?"

Demon nodded and snuggled closer to her husband. "Latharr has promised to show me their temple tomorrow. She says that ordinarily she wouldn't allow an outsider to see their 'holy sanctum', but as I'm a 'Child of the Light', she'll make an exception for me." She paused for a moment, then smiled. "I never knew that being blonde could have such advantages."

Matthew laughed softly and rolled onto his side, moving his wife onto her back and lifting his hand to push her hair back from her face. "It works for me. Now, it's taken a little longer than a minute, but the main gun is back on line, so I plan to take advantage myself. Captain One Shot's about to take aim and fire again."

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Gideon slid beneath the hot water, until only the upper half of his face showed above the surface. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose, being careful to keep his mouth shut, as he gazed across the pool at his wife. She was sitting on an underwater ledge, smiling at him as he wallowed happily in the hot water.

*Pushing himself up, so the water only came up to his neck, Gideon sighed again and asked, "How did you manage to get them to heat this room *and* the water?"*

Deborah chuckled as she said, "Natural charm," she paused and her smile turned to a wicked grin as she continued, "and when that didn't work, I stamped my foot and pouted."

Gideon laughed and slid around the hot water pool until he was sitting next to his wife, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her close. She turned slightly and tilted her head back, demanding a kiss, so he obliged her, thoroughly. When they broke for breath, Deborah snuggled against his side and went on, "Seriously, once I found out they had the local equivalents of saunas, I persuaded them to heat this bathroom to the same temperature. Of course, what's a sauna for them is just comfortable for us. They were much more reluctant to heat the water to the right temperature, as they were convinced we'd hurt ourselves."

The Captain leaned back and moved his hand to caress his wife's breast, rubbing her nipple gently, making her moan softly before she carried on with her story. "At that point I did something that I never normally do. I got stubborn."

Gideon snorted and got his arm punched as a result. He responded by grabbing Deborah around the waist and pulling her across him, until she was straddling him as he sat on the ledge. He pulled her close, allowing her to feel his arousal.

"I don't care how you did it, really. I'm just glad you did. We haven't made love in a tub for way too long. Let's enjoy it." He pulled her head down and kissed her, as she rubbed her pelvis against him, stiffening him further.

Deborah moved her mouth to his ear, then whispered, her voice rough and deep with passion, "Yes, Sir. Certainly, Sir. Permission to go on top, Sir"

Gideon grinned up at her, as she smiled down at him. "Permission granted."

"No public displays of affection, remember? We did all that before we left the room, so keep your hands to yourself, for once," Gideon spoke to his wife out of the corner of his mouth, as they walked toward the shuttle, shadowed by G'Tan and No'Kar. He was trying to make a joke of it, as he could see Deborah was struggling to stay in control of her emotions. Her face was frozen into the flat, expressionless mask she wore when she was working hard at not displaying her feelings.

Gideon knew that Deborah wasn't happy about him going off on his own, but then she never was. He whispered again, "Don't worry. G'Tan will keep me out of

trouble."

The deep grumbling noise from behind them signified G'Tan's agreement with his statement. The Captain glanced at his wife as he heard her sniff, then turned to face her as they arrived at the bottom of the ramp. He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. Deborah returned his grip, and just for a second her mask slipped, showing him all of her love and concern for him. Gideon longed to take her into his arms, to hold her tightly against him, to kiss her one last time before he left. He resisted the urge and smiled gently, then pursed his lips into the shape of a kiss.

Deborah did the same, then whispered. "Please be careful."

Gideon smiled and squeezed her hand again. "I'll be careful, and G'Tan will be even more careful. We'll be back before nightfall."

Deborah's grasp of his hand had become almost painful. Gideon watched as she gathered her control again and she finally released his hand. Her voice hardly wobbled as she said, "I'll be waiting right here."

The Captain smiled and turned, striding up the ramp with G'Tan following, asking himself why it never got any easier to leave his wife behind, and telling himself that soon he'd never have to do it again.

Demon watched the shuttle taking off, telling herself not to be stupid. Matthew was only going away for the day, and he wasn't going that far, and G'Tan was with him, so he'd be perfectly safe, and...and...and... She swallowed hard, controlling herself, making sure that her distress didn't show in her outer demeanor, although she knew that Matthew had sensed her concern. She knew that he'd wanted to hold her tightly once more before he left, but they had agreed that public displays of affection could undermine Demon's position in the eyes of the priestesses, and reduce her effectiveness as a negotiator.

So Demon tried not to bite her lip, as she watched the lights from the shuttle's engines disappear over the hills on the horizon. She closed her eyes and linked to her son in the Excalibur, high in orbit above them. Her ability to link to her sisters was no longer effective at such a range, but she could still send to Marcus, although it was a strain.

Sending waves of affection and calmness through their link, Demon reassured her son that she and Matthew were safe, and told him how they both missed

him. Marcus' response was almost a pout.

[/If you miss me, why don't you come home?/] Demon could sense the tears behind the question and hurried to reassure the little boy.

[/We'll come home soon, I promise. We love you, darling. Now be a good boy and tell Uncle John that Daddy has gone to visit the other people down here, and he'll come back this evening. Can you do that?/]

Demon waited for her son to respond. She knew that John Matheson was keeping himself wide open to Marcus at all times, as the child was the only reliable channel of communication from surface to orbit. It was difficult and frustrating to have to couch reports in terms that a four-year-old could understand and pass on, but given the interference with all communications and sensor bands, it was the only option open to them.

After a few moments, Marcus' voice sounded in Demon's mind. [/I told Auntie Angel, and she told Uncle John. He's just said that I'm a very clever boy and that me and Dasha can have ice cream for breakfast, if you say it's OK. Is it OK, Mummy? Please?/]

Demon sent a wave of amusement and love back to her son. [/Ice cream for breakfast is only allowed on special days, but I guess this is one of them. Don't Faylinn and Naima get ice cream, too? It's OK, as long as you and Dasha share./]

The almost sub-vocal grumbling that came back through the link from Marcus made Demon want to laugh. [/Don't know why they should get ice-cream 'cos they haven't done anything special and it's not their Mummy and Daddy who have gone off and left them and they're not my friends like Dasha is so why should I share with them not fair there'll be less ice cream for me and Dasha don't want to share.../]

Demon cut across the stream of consciousness sharply. [/Marcus! Don't be mean. The girls deserve ice cream just as much as you and Dasha. Now be a good boy and send me a hug, because I miss you terribly. I can't wait to get back home and tickle you for being such a bad boy./]

Marcus loved being tickled by his mother, although he always tried to pretend he didn't. He screamed with laughter when she tickled him, and the prospect of such attention instantly brought him back to good humor. Demon felt as if a cocoon of love enveloped her, as Marcus sent her a hug, then she heard his voice fading from her mind as he sent, *[/Bye bye, Mummy! Got to go to Auntie Lily's for*

breakfast ice cream now.../ and he was gone.

For a moment, Demon felt utterly alone. Bereft of her son's mental presence, and her husband's physical proximity, she wanted to weep from loneliness. A hand gently placed on her arm brought her back to the present, and she looked up into a pair of red eyes, glowing with concern. The large Narn Marine who acted as Demon's bodyguard murmured softly, "Are you all right, Madam? Is there anything I can do?"

Demon swallowed her grief and smiled. "Just missing my men, but don't tell the priestesses that, will you, No'Kar?"

The Narn female smiled back and shook her head. "It's our secret. I have to admit, I'm missing my own three." Demon smiled, remembering the Narn pouchlings who played with Marcus regularly. It still amused her that No'Kar's children were called No'Matt, D'Gid and G'Deon. Although the Narns had not disclosed which male was father to which pouchling, G'Tan acted as patriarch to the group on board the Excalibur, and they all behaved as if they were one large family with eleven children. No'Kar went on, "I think we ought to go back to the castle soon. It's very cold out here and Latharr is beginning to look irritated by the delay."

Demon shivered, suddenly aware of the bitterly cold early morning wind. "Lead the way. Not that it will be any warmer indoors, but at least we'll be out of this damned wind. And will you call me Demon, please? 'Madam' makes me feel as if I'm older than Latharr."

No'Kar laughed softly and agreed, then the two women made their way back into the castle together.

Christina Jackson watched from the castle gate as Demon and No'Kar returned. The Captain's wife's face was frozen into an expressionless mask, but Jackson knew her well enough to know that she wasn't happy about her husband having gone off without her. There was little anyone could do about it, though, so Jackson turned to the Priestess standing next to her, also watching the Human and Narn walking up the path toward them.

"Shall we go inside? We can start our discussions as soon as Mrs. Gideon and Marine No'Kar rejoin us."

Latharr frowned as she said, "I do not understand the names you use. What

does 'Mrs.' signify? In what way does it differ from 'Captain'? And why do these two women have different titles? What is the difference between a 'Mrs.' and a 'Marine'?"

Jackson sighed, but took care not to allow Latharr to hear her. How could she explain the differences? She smiled at the Priestess and decided to lie. "They are individual names, just as Latharr is," she paused, waiting for Demon and No'Kar to get within earshot. That way she wouldn't have to brief them on her lie. She continued as the Narn Marine and Captain's wife came to a halt. "Mrs. Deborah Gideon has three names, but it is acceptable to use just the first and last names together, as in 'Mrs. Gideon'. I am Lieutenant Christina Jackson, also three names, and you may also use the first and last together. Having three names indicates our superior status, which is why we were chosen as negotiators for this mission. Marines No'Kar and Ka'Van have only two names, and can be addressed by their last names alone." Jackson turned slightly, so Latharr couldn't see her face, as she winked at Demon and No'Kar.

Latharr smiled broadly at the compliment implied by the ISA sending representatives with three names to negotiate with her. "Ah, I understand now..." she trailed off, frowning again, then continued, "But in that case, why does a mere male, such as Captain Gideon, have three names? He introduced himself as Captain Matthew Gideon, which I now understand indicates his high status in your society, but why is a male allowed such status?"

Jackson looked at Demon, silently begging for help. The tall blonde smiled sweetly at the Priestess, as she took her arm gently and steered her back inside the castle, saying with complete seriousness, "My husband was very fortunate when I chose to marry him."

The dark Lieutenant bit her lip to prevent herself from laughing aloud. It was a typical Demon response. Not exactly a lie, but completely misleading. Jackson followed the Priestess and the Captain's wife into the castle, wondering what creative embroidery on the truth Demon might come up with next.

*Gideon set the shuttle down carefully, in the narrow space between the cliffs and the outcroppings of boulders that littered the flat bottom of the valley. He was relieved that he had got the shuttle there in one piece. It had been a rough ride, with the engines surging and failing unpredictably. The Captain decided that he *really* didn't like this planet.*

The location of the rebel base looked even bleaker than the matriarch's castle, and

the Captain wondered how the rebels survived here. There was little sign of agriculture, not even the low heather like plants that grew on the moors surrounding the castle. The valley was narrow and steep, with mountains crowding in on either side, and it felt horribly like a trap to the Captain, as he leaned forward to turn off the shuttle engines.

He glanced across at G'Tan, sitting in the co-pilot's chair next to him, and said, "Welcome to Happy Valley. Try not to get too excited by the balmy climate, luxuriant foliage and beautiful dancing girls arrayed for our pleasure." He nodded to the front viewscreen, through which they could see their welcome party approaching.

The party was made up of three figures totally swathed in dark material. Only their eyes showed through the gap in their robes. Gideon knew that the clothing wasn't for protection from the elements. The temperature outside was just above freezing, the equivalent of a pleasant spring day on this planet. So the robes had to be traditional garb for the rebel group, and Gideon wondered whether they were deliberately designed to obscure the difference between the sexes. This group had rebelled against the priestesses, and was in theory egalitarian. The Captain wanted more evidence before he accepted that statement.

G'Tan snorted in amusement at Gideon's words, as he unfastened his harness and rose from the co-pilot's seat. "I'm not the excitable type, Captain, but you never know. Something about those robes could be very alluring. The way they totally hide every part of the body, the way they completely obscure the face. Who knows what hidden delights await the person who perseveres with the unwrapping of such gifts?"

Gideon chuckled as he followed the large Narn to the door of the shuttle, pulling on his thermal insulated jacket, hat, scarf and gloves, before he nodded to G'Tan to release the door and ramp lock. Even with all the additional clothing, the biting wind nearly took the Captain's breath away, as he descended to meet the group waiting below, his bodyguard following close on his heels.

Demon listened carefully as Lieutenant Jackson outlined the reasons for their visit, keeping herself wide open to the woman sitting opposite. Latharr sat alone on the other side of the round table, placed in the middle of a large, draughty hall. Demon couldn't prevent a small shiver. It really wasn't much warmer inside the hall than outside, and with the windows open to the elements, there was little more protection from the wind. No'Kar and Ka'Van stood a few paces behind the two human negotiators, standing at the Narn equivalent of parade rest, alert for

any possibility of attack.

Demon tucked her gloved hands between her legs and watched the Priestess carefully, as she listened to the Lieutenant. Latharr was a tall woman of generous proportions, but as far as Demon could tell, she didn't carry a gram of fat on her. Her arms--bare to the shoulders, despite the bitter cold--were firm and well muscled. The Priestess held herself upright in her seat, her head high on her stiff neck, her long, dark hair swept back from her face into a braid that fell down her back, reaching to her waist. Her very human looking face was stern and proud, with vertical frown lines etched into her forehead, between her heavy eyebrows. Large, dark brown eyes were set wide across a long, straight nose, with a high bridge. Sharp cheekbones and a wide mouth with narrow lips completed the picture of a very imperious woman, accustomed to control and obedience. She listened in silence as Jackson spoke, but Demon could sense her impatience. Latharr wanted to cut to the core of the business in hand.

*As soon as Jackson had finished her introductions, the Priestess launched into a long list of demands. Demon listened carefully, noting which items Latharr *really* wanted, and which items she was less concerned about. As she focused on the Priestess' stipulations, Demon jotted apparently random doodles onto a note pad in front of her. While Jackson's entire attention seemed centered on Latharr, Demon knew that she was giving occasional glances to Demon's jottings, which in reality were detailing which of Latharr's requirements were important to her.*

A pattern was soon discernible. Everything on the Priestess' list of demands that really mattered to her was related to hydroponics. The acquisition of this technology would allow the priestesses to survive without being reliant on the land around them. They could build greenhouses and produce enough food to provide a subsistence level of survival for the current population.

Jackson waited politely for Latharr to finish her list, then said quietly, "We have an alternative proposition for you."

Latharr raised one eyebrow in a very human indication of polite curiosity. Jackson continued. "We would like to offer you a new home. We can take you and your people to a new planet, with a climate appropriate to your needs."

The Priestess' eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and Demon could sense her amazement and excitement. This was clearly something she had never expected. Demon wrote a single word on the notepad in front of her--Bingo.

She watched Jackson's lips quirk into a half smile, as the Lieutenant picked up the message, and waited for Latharr's response. The Priestess was trying to play

down her excitement at the offer, feigning disinterest, as she asked for elaboration.

Jackson leaned forward and looked solicitous as she continued. "Your planet is dying. It's been dying for a thousand or more of your planet's cycles around your sun. From here, you can see the glaciers approaching from the north. If you walk south for no more than two days, you can see the progress of the ice from that direction, too. In less than a hundred solar cycles, the glaciers will meet and your people will die. We can provide you with the technology to feed your people for a while," Latharr's eyes widened slightly again, as she realized that the ISA negotiators had fathomed her real concerns, "but that isn't a long-term solution. We would rather offer you a new start, on a planet where you can make a new home for your people, where you can not only survive, but where you can also prosper. That is what we can offer you."

Demon had sensed Latharr's despair when Jackson had described her people's situation. It was an accurate summary of their fate and the Priestess knew it. Her despair had changed to excitement as the Lieutenant had continued with her offer. Demon knew that they had the basis for a deal, and made a note to that effect on her pad.

Latharr was still hiding her exhilaration, keeping her face expressionless, having no idea that she was sitting opposite an empath, who could read her like a book. For a moment, Demon felt guilty about using her powers, and she understood why telepaths were so strictly controlled, but she pushed those doubts aside, telling herself that she was using her abilities for the benefit of both the ISA and these women. Only one area continued to concern the tall blonde, which was the fate of the men in this society. The issue would have to be addressed, but later. For now, Demon watched carefully, senses wide open, as Latharr sat back in her chair and spoke softly.

"What you say about our planet cannot be denied. We have been fighting the darkness for a thousand years. Our history tells us that we were once a prosperous and plentiful people, spread across our lands, enjoying the fruitfulness that our fertile planet provided. Then the darkness came. The sun cooled and the ice spread. We did not have the means to resist the encroachment of the night, and most of our people died in the years that followed. Then the Light came to our aid. The Light could not turn back the darkness but it changed us, helping those few of us who remained to survive the cold and the dark. Then the Light left us and we have lived in darkness for a thousand years, trying to prove ourselves worthy, hoping that one day the Light will return and save us again."

The words were spoken in a soft singsong voice, almost a litany. Demon was sure that this was an often-repeated story, perhaps passed down in much the same words from generation to generation, through the cold years, as the survivors diminished in numbers. Latharr's eyes had softened and become unfocused as she spoke, but now they sharpened again, as her gaze turned to Demon. With a look of triumph, the Priestess' voice was filled with wonder as she said, "And now the Light has returned, as was prophesied, and the Light will save us all."

Demon's stomach turned and she felt sick, fearing what the Priestess might mean by those words. The tall blonde clamped her jaw shut on the vomit that threatened to rise from her stomach, and froze her face into immobility.

Jackson turned and looked at Demon in surprise. She could see that the Captain's wife was as taken aback as she was, although her face was a frozen mask. Demon's blonde hair was completely covered by the black furry hat she wore, so was Latharr still referring to the hair? Or did she have some other reason for calling Demon a 'Child of the Light'? Jackson knew enough about the events on Centauri Prime the previous year to start a nasty suspicion nagging at the back of her mind. But if she was correct, how could Latharr have known?

Before Jackson could respond to Latharr's astonishing assertion, Demon leaned forward and spoke softly. "It's the ISA and my husband who will save you, and before they do so, there are some conditions."

This was news to Jackson. They had cleared the offer of a new home with President Sheridan's office before coming down to the planet, and as far as she was aware, no conditions had been made. The Lieutenant decided to wait and see what Demon was after, before she intervened. This could get interesting.

Latharr looked wary as she asked, "What conditions?"

Demon smiled, and Jackson felt a wave of reassurance sweep over her, making her feel that she could totally trust the tall blonde who sat beside her. [Sneaky!] The Lieutenant couldn't help but admire Demon's manipulation of the Priestess.

"The ISA does not tolerate slavery in either its members or its protectorates, which is what you would become. When you move to your new home, your men must accompany you as free and equal members of your society. No slaves or second-class citizens will be accepted."

Latharr started to splutter a protest, but Demon carried on talking, ignoring the Priestess's attempts at interruption. "Many of the members of the ISA have a history of discrimination, but in most it's females who have been abused, kept in a lower position in society, considered useful only for breeding purposes, for pleasure or as servants. Such discrimination is not acceptable, regardless of which gender is demeaned. This is the condition. Without your agreement, we have no basis for discussion and these negotiations are at an end."

Jackson watched in surprise as Demon started to rise from the table, but followed her lead. A few centuries before, on her own planet, Jackson would have been held in a subservient position because of both her sex and the color of her skin. In her view, no one should ever be treated in that way. The Lieutenant stood tall and proud next to Demon and started to turn with her to leave the great hall, when Latharr's voice stopped them.

"Wait. You are asking us to change the very basis of our society, everything we believe in. I cannot commit my people to such a change without their full support and agreement. I must have time to consult, before I give you my answer."

Jackson turned back to the table and nodded. "That is acceptable. How long will you require for consultation?"

Latharr paused, obviously calculating, then said, "We will have an answer for you by tomorrow. In the meantime, I will send one of my acolytes to bring you food, and she will then guide you to our temple. It is essential that the Light returns to its home."

Jackson turned to look at Demon, checking that the proposal was acceptable, her concern about this further mention of 'the Light' increasing. The tall blonde nodded almost imperceptibly, and Jackson told Latharr that they would wait until morning. As the Priestess left, the Lieutenant turned to Demon, saying quietly, "Nice job. Your timing was perfect. She'd got all excited at the prospect of a new home, then you pulled the rug out from under her. Do you think it will work?"

Demon frowned in thought. "It should. She was horrified at the idea of integrating men into their society, but even more horrified at the prospect of her people dying, when a new home could save them. Let's hope that the others feel that way, too. Now, there's someone coming..." The tall blonde trailed off as a young woman entered the hall, carrying a large platter of food.

The woman set the platter on the table, then bowed deeply toward Demon and Jackson, straightening as she said, "My name is Celona. I am to be your guide

and helper. How may I serve you?"

John Matheson stood like a statue, arms folded in front of him, behind the sensor operator's station. He was well aware that he was making the senior operator, Ankaren, uncomfortable, but he did not intend to shift his position for the foreseeable future.

Ankaren's murmured comment, "Watching me isn't going to make me work any harder or faster, Commander," was water off a duck's back to John.

He maintained a bland expression as he replied, "Maybe not, but it makes me feel better. Indulge me." The Brakiri shrugged and went back to working on the sensors.

John had tasked the Sensor and Communication teams with finding a way through the interference that blanketed the planet below. He had summoned both teams to the nearest mess hall a few hours before, even calling in those crew who would normally have been off duty at that time. He'd then laid down the challenge for them, telling them that their Captain was relying on them to find a solution. He'd watched as the mixed teams of humans, Brakiri, Minbari, and Gaim had stood a little more upright, determined to meet Gideon's needs. John had stirred them up by explaining how their Captain was laying his own life and that of his wife on the line, in his determination to complete the mission. He'd explained that the Sensor and Communication teams could help protect Matthew and Demon, if they could find a way of communicating through the interference.

It had been a shameless manipulation of the crew's devotion to their Captain. Matthew was blissfully unaware that most of his crew would gladly offer their lives in exchange for his, but John knew it well. He would, after all, be at the front of the queue if such a circumstance arose. As far as John was concerned, no sacrifice could ever be great enough to make up for all Matthew had done for him.

So John stood and watched as Ankaren and Lieutenant JG Siddhartha, newly promoted Head of Communications, battled it out to see who could crack the problem of ship to surface communication first. He allowed his thoughts to wander for a moment, going over the message he had received via Marcus and Angel a few hours earlier. He'd known that Matthew intended visiting the rebel group. Indeed, it made sense for him to do so, while Jackson and Demon negotiated with the priestesses, as a 'mere male' could contribute little to those

discussions. Matheson suppressed a smile as he remembered Matthew's outrage at the priestesses' attitude toward him.

Even having known of Matthew's intentions, John wasn't comfortable with his Captain's plan. It meant splitting his group--which the Commander wasn't sure was wise--in what could be considered hostile territory. He couldn't help but remember Trulann's report of what the telepath accompanying the original party to contact the rebels had felt. John remembered Trulann's words.

"She could not define the source of her discomfort, but would only say that there was something wrong, some unseen and unexplained presence at the meeting."

Just what could be waiting for his Captain and friend at that rebel stronghold? John wasn't sure, but he wanted to find out, and he didn't want to have to wait for a report passed through an unhappy four-year-old boy. Setting his face into a glower of disapproval, the Commander fixed his stare on the back on Ankaren's neck. He suppressed a smile when the Brakiri lifted his hand and rubbed the exact spot where the telepath had focused his gaze.

[Oops! Sorry, Ankaren. That was only supposed to be a physical glare, not a mental nudge.] John kept his thought to himself, but apologetically moved his gaze to Siddhartha. It had been a while since she had suffered under his scrutiny. It was her turn now.

Demon followed the acolyte up the short flight of steps to the temple, wondering what might await her on the other side of the doors. She had a very bad feeling about the whole issue of 'the Light'. While she may have been the only blonde the priestesses had ever seen, Demon was convinced that they were referring to more than just her hair when they called her a 'Child of the Light'. What she wasn't clear about was how they knew she was...Demon's thoughts paused, searching for the correct word. Possessed? It had felt like possession, when she'd first found out about the Vorlon that shared her body and mind. Like possession by an evil spirit that could take control of her body at any time, inflicting pain and suffering on everyone around her.

Demon still had nightmares about the thing that slept inside her. It was the being that had abducted her and her sisters, had experimented on them, and changed them. Then it had punished them for their disobedience, when they had refused to kill for it. She had told her sisters and their families that she could cope with knowing that the Vorlon was still inside her, if she could be sure it was dormant, but she'd been wrong. Her sisters didn't know about the nightmares.

Only Matthew knew about the nights when Demon woke up screaming, sweating from every pore, and shaking with fear. She had dreamed again and again that the Vorlon took over her body, leaving her frozen inside, watching herself hurting the people she loved, without being able to stop herself. The feelings of helplessness, panic, and lack of control these nightmares produced had left Demon shaken for hours afterwards. During that time, Matthew had held her, comforting her, reassuring her that she was safe, she was in control and that he loved her. Demon sometimes thought she would have gone mad without Matthew's support and love.

The frequency of the nightmares had diminished with time, but the prospect of facing her fears again, within the temple that lay hidden behind the doors, still terrified Demon. It took all her control not to turn and run, fleeing from her own terrors. Telling herself that she would never recover if she couldn't face her fears, Demon braced herself, as the doors swung open.

Jackson watched the Captain's wife carefully as the doors opened. Demon's face was dead white, all color draining away as they approached the temple. The contrast between her black hat and ashen face was stark, and the Lieutenant could only hope that the tall blonde wasn't going to faint or throw up.

Peering ahead into the darkness, Jackson stepped forward, following the acolyte and allowing Demon to take her own time in entering. No'Kar and Ka'Van flanked Demon's shoulders, providing her with protection and support.

As the women entered, the lights slowly went up inside the temple, showing a large open area, at the front of which was a single block of stone. Into this was carved a triangle, which itself was divided into three equal parts. On top of the stone rested another small triangular frame, held upright by some means Jackson couldn't see. This frame appeared to be made of some kind of metallic material. Three narrow wires projected in from the sides, holding an uneven fragment of some other material in the center of the open frame.

Jackson stepped closer to try to make out what the fragment was, but her path was blocked by Celona's arm. The acolyte whispered apologetically, "Only the Children of the Light may approach." She nodded at Demon, who stood frozen to the spot, visibly shaking.

The Lieutenant reached out to place her hand reassuringly on the tall blonde's arm, drawing her attention away from the metal frame. "Are you all right? Mrs. Gideon? Can you talk?"

Demon licked her dry lips and croaked, "It's the device they used on us. It's how they changed us. It hurt..." her voice trailed off into silence. Jackson had no idea what Demon was talking about, but she could see that the Captain's wife was badly shaken.

Jackson turned to the acolyte, saying, "I think we should leave. Mrs. Gideon is unwell." She turned and was trying to steer Demon out of the temple, when she heard Celona's cry from behind them.

"But she carries the Light! Look, the Triluminary is glowing! Just like it did when she first arrived in the castle!"

Jackson glanced over her shoulder, and saw the fragment in the center of the metal frame shining brightly. The light grew stronger with every second that passed, until it was almost too bright to look at. The Lieutenant's attention was diverted when she heard Demon whisper, "No! Please, don't hurt them any more. Stop the pain, please Angel I'm sorry they won't stop oh please stop what are you doing to her why are you hurting her don't hurt her stop hurt me not her stop please stop..." her voice faded into an incoherent mumble.

Demon's face was frozen but tears rolled down her cheeks, as she continued to mutter. Jackson didn't wait any longer, but ignoring Celona's protests, she grabbed Demon's arm and rushed her out of the temple, with the two Narn Marines following close behind.

As they ran down the steps outside, Demon's knees gave way under her, and Jackson found herself trying to hold the tall blonde upright, as she slumped into a faint. No'Kar stepped forward and pulled Demon away, sweeping the unconscious woman up into her arms and carrying her across the courtyard, with Jackson and Ka'Van hurrying after. Celona dogged their heels, pleading with them to go back to the light.

Gideon sat at the long table, watching the leader of the rebel group, Moren, who had greeted them enthusiastically on their arrival. Pulling his face covering back, Moren had invited Gideon and G'Tan to join him in the caves where the rebels had made their base, guiding them solicitously out of the cold wind, expressing his concern that they should suffer no discomfort in the hostile climate. The warm welcome had made a pleasant change from that provided by the priestesses, and the Captain found himself liking the leader of the rebels.

He wondered, for a moment, if the 'unseen presence' detected by the telepath on

the scouting party would make an appearance during their visit. How would he know if it did? As he couldn't answer that question, Gideon went back to studying the rebel leader.

Moren was a tall man, matching G'Tan in height, if not in width. Like the priestesses at the castle, he had dark skin, hair and eyes, with a prominent nose and wide, generous mouth. His companions had been slightly shorter, but as they'd never removed their face coverings, Gideon never did discover whether they were male or female. After escorting their visitors to a central chamber, deep underground, the two others had disappeared silently, leaving G'Tan and Gideon alone with Moren.

Gideon glanced around the room, noting the low ceilings stained with smoke from the candles held in sconces around the walls. The furniture was primitive and the walls themselves still showed the marks of the tools used to hack the chamber from the living rock. The corridors through which they had been led were equally dark and low. The Captain wondered whether these had once been mines, later adapted as living quarters for the rebel group. One thing was certain; the standard of living of this group was low, and the visible technology primitive. That should mean they would be receptive to proposals the ISA had for them, in exchange for their mining rights.

Moren bustled around the room, pouring drinks, and serving food to his guests, making them as comfortable as he could. [Which isn't very comfortable at all,] Gideon thought, shifting slightly on the hard seat of the chair, politely declining the rather wizened looking vegetables on the platter Moren offered. Sipping the drink that had been poured, after G'Tan had surreptitiously scanned it for safety, the Captain was relieved to find that it was just water. Ice cold water. [Big surprise.]

When the rebel leader had finished trying to be hospitable, he removed his outer clothing and settled into a chair on the other side of the long, narrow table from Gideon. G'Tan had declined to sit, remaining standing at his Captain's shoulder, red eyes constantly moving around the room, although the only obvious access was the door by which they had entered.

Not wishing to plunge straight in, Gideon asked Moren how he and his people had come to this place. Moren launched into a long story about how his mother had led a rebellion against the ruling priestesses of her time. "She was a strong woman, with strong convictions, Captain. She believed that the ways of the Children of the Light were wrong. She questioned whether her people had been correct in following the ways of the Light for a thousand years, when the Light

still hadn't returned to help them. My mother tried to tell her sisters that they were wrong in treating the men of this planet as breeding animals. When the priestesses refused to listen, she led a group of like-minded women to free as many men as they could, and they fled the main settlement. That was over forty years ago."

Moren went on to describe some of the trials his mother's followers had suffered in their search for a new home. They had lost many people in their wanderings before the remaining few hundred had settled in this valley. "They found these caves and decided they offered the best possible chance of survival. They did not know who had carved these tunnels and chambers, but the caves provided them with shelter. They assumed that this area must have been mined by our ancestors, before the darkness came."

Gideon listened with interest, noting the repeated mentions of the light and the darkness, and he hoped to get the opportunity to find out more about those references, but Moren had just provided him with too good an opening to pass up on. "On the subject of mines, as you know, Moren, we're interested in negotiating mining rights for your planet. The ISA want to negotiate a fair settlement for those rights. Can you tell us what you require in exchange?" The Captain was interested to hear the rebel leader's list. He intended to compare it with the priestesses' demands, when he and G'Tan returned to the castle that evening.

Moren shrugged and smiled. "Our needs are straightforward, Captain Gideon. You see how little we have here." He gestured to the primitive cavern in which they sat. "We need a new home, with the tools and supplies to make it a home. Can you take my people to another place? Somewhere we can start again, and build a society for ourselves. A place where we can thrive and prosper in peace. Give us the land we need, and the equipment to make it happen, then we'll grant you all the mining rights you want."

Gideon had been hoping for that answer, although he suspected that Moren was desperate enough to settle for less than he'd stated. He could only admire the rebel leader for trying to bluff more out of their visitors than he was willing to accept. What Moren didn't know was that Gideon had agreed with Sheridan, before arriving at Inesbitrin, that the best solution would be total evacuation. The combined population of both groups on the planet was now only a few thousand, and they could be easily relocated. There were plenty of ISA planets with polar regions that were too cold for occupation by current colonists, but which would be perfect for these people. Gideon had received Sheridan's assurances that they could locate the rebels on a different planet to the priestesses, to ensure that the

hostilities between them ended.

Before he agreed to Moren's request, Gideon wanted to be sure that the rebel leader understood what it would mean for his people. The Captain was convinced that evacuation would be in the best interests of all concerned, but he was curious. [OK, nosy. At least, that's what Deborah would say.] Gideon suppressed a smile as he thought of his wife, and how much he was looking forward to playing another game of Captain One Shot and Ice Queen Myrtle when he got back to the castle that evening.

"We can do that for you, Moren, but it's a drastic step. Have you considered the alternatives? We could provide you with support right here. While we wouldn't be willing to give you weapons for your fight with the priestesses, we could give you agricultural and medical supplies, and hydroponics technology to improve your standard of living."

Gideon watched Moren carefully, as the rebel leader shrugged. "We don't need weapons. We have allies who provide us with arms and food." The Captain sat more upright at this comment. Allies? What allies? He made a mental note for later and allowed Moren to continue uninterrupted.

"We have little use for agricultural support, as we have no suitable land for farming. Hydroponics might be of interest, but even then, there is little space available for such an initiative. This valley is the only place within many days' of travel that is in any way habitable. The surrounding area is completely inhospitable. We were lucky to find this place, and luckier that our allies are willing to feed us. We have no way of producing our own food."

Gideon pondered the leader's words. He'd seen for himself on their shuttle flight that the terrain surrounding the valley was desolate. He just hadn't realized how hostile the environment was. And just who were these allies, who provided food and weapons, but little else? Time to ask some questions and get some answers.

"Who are these allies? If they've been providing you with food and weapons, why haven't you asked them to give you a new home?" The Captain watched the rebel leader carefully, as he sighed and explained.

"I told you that my parents thought these mines had been carved by our ancestors. They were wrong. Within a few weeks of arriving here, they found out who the true miners were. They were aliens who were taking the mineral wealth from our planet without the niceties of payment, such as the ISA has offered us." Moren smiled warmly at Gideon and nodded politely to G'Tan, obviously appreciative of the courtesies being shown by their presence. He continued, "My

mother negotiated an agreement with these strangers. In exchange for food and weapons to fight the priestesses, we gave them full mining rights in these mountains, and helped them by working the mines." Moren waved his hand, indicating the area above and surrounding the caves.

Gideon leaned forward, his arms resting on the table and frowned. "What do these strangers call themselves? And would they be willing to share the mining rights with the ISA?"

This was a complication that no one had envisaged. Warning bells were sounding in the Captain's mind. He had a nose for trouble and it was twitching at the prospect of a third party becoming involved in negotiations. Gideon tried to tell himself not to get too concerned; it was quite possible that they could factor this new group into the negotiations.

The rebel leader shrugged. "You would need to negotiate with them directly. Once we leave for our new home, that won't be our concern."

Moren's attitude began to irritate the Captain, and he found his previous goodwill toward the man draining away. "I need more than that, Moren. Describe these people to me. If you're not going to be open with us, then maybe we'd be better off dealing with the priestesses." Gideon started to rise from his seat and G'Tan moved toward the door, checking their exit was clear.

The rebel leader leaped to his feet and cried out in alarm. "Please! I didn't mean to offend you, Captain! Of course I'll be open with you. If you can give us a new home, then you would be providing us with more than our allies ever could."

Gideon settled back in his seat, but G'Tan remained vigilant by the door, looking out into the corridor beyond. He was obviously as concerned by this mention of allies as his Captain.

Moren sat back in his chair heavily, and took a quick sip of his drink, before continuing with his story. "Our allies give us weapons because they hate the priestesses as much as we do. Maybe more. I have never really understood why they don't just destroy the castle and the surrounding settlements. They certainly have the power. We have seen the ships they use to take the minerals away. But for some reason of their own, they are unwilling to attack the priestesses directly, and prefer us to do their work for them. They have not been happy with our recent cessation of hostilities, but so far they have accepted my explanation that we need time to regroup and plan a new line of attack. I fear they will soon demand that we start our war again, and my people no longer have the heart for fighting."

The rebel leader leaned forward, resting his head in his hands for a moment, then he looked up at Gideon, his eyes full of sorrow. The Captain saw for the first time how weary this man was, as he went on, "We are tired, Captain. Tired of fighting, and tired of living from hand to mouth, dependent on the charity of others. Tired of never having enough food, and tired of seeing our children die because we do not have the medicines to treat their illnesses. We have begged our allies to take us away, to help us find a new home, but they refuse. They tell us that they have no home of their own. Why should they give us what they do not have themselves?"

The hackles rose on the back of Gideon's neck, and he stood, leaning both hands on the table. "They say they have no home of their own?" Moren nodded, and the Captain shivered. He had a bad feeling about this. "What do they call themselves, Moren? Do these allies of yours have a name?"

Moren's answer was everything Gideon had feared. "Yes. They call themselves Drakh."

Demon gradually became aware of her surroundings and realized that she was no longer in that terrible place. The Triluminary no longer called to her, setting up some sympathetic reaction inside her, almost a physical vibration deep within her. She knew that it had been calling to the Vorlon, trying to waken the sleeping being. Demon had felt it stirring from its sleep, and all her fears had rushed in on her, her memories of pain and despair overwhelming her. After that, everything was blank, until she opened her eyes to see Jackson bending over her, looking worried.

Licking dry lips, Demon managed to whisper, "Could I have some water, please?" She saw the look of relief on Jackson's face, and knew she must have frightened the Lieutenant when she fainted.

A large, spotted hand held out a cup, and Demon looked up into a pair of concerned red eyes. No'Kar smiled briefly as she held out the water, which Demon tried to take, but found that her hands were shaking so badly, she could hardly grasp the cup. No'Kar steadied her hand enough to allow her to take a sip, then another, until she gradually recovered her composure.

Demon took a deep breath and pulled herself more upright in her chair, saying, "Sorry about..." She stopped dead, as she heard her own words come out in a shaky squeak, nothing like her usual deep, controlled tones. She cleared her throat and tried again, this time managing something approaching her normal voice.

"I'm sorry about that. It was very silly of me to faint. That thing brought back some rather unpleasant memories. Is everyone all right?"

Jackson patted her shoulder kindly, and reassured her that they were only worried about her, the rest of them were just fine. Demon nodded gratefully and took another sip at the water, at last able to hold the cup unaided.

She became aware that Celona was hovering agitatedly behind Jackson and the two Narns. Demon cleared her throat again, and spoke softly to the young acolyte. "Could you tell me again what you called that triangular thing? And what is it used for?" She smiled shakily at her companions, gesturing everyone to take a seat.

Celona perched on the edge of her chair and said hesitantly, "We call it a Triluminary. That's what they taught us to call it. They used it to change us." She looked anxiously from Demon to Jackson and back. "It started to glow when you first arrived, so we knew one of you must carry the Light, but we didn't know which, until we saw the sign." She gestured toward Demon's head, and the tall blonde knew the acolyte was referring to her hair.

[They were wrong, but they were right! How strange!] Demon thought, as she listened to Celona.

"It's never hurt anyone before. Why would it hurt someone who carries the Light?"

Demon decided she had no intention of answering that question. The least the priestesses knew of her experiences with the Vorlon, the better. Their own experiences were obviously very different, and they didn't need to know how much Demon hated and despised the beings of light.

She avoided the question and encouraged Celona to tell them how the Vorlons had come to their planet a thousand years before, to save a people slowly dying with their world. The explanation for how the sun had dimmed and the climate changed was confusing, as all Celona could really say was that 'darkness had come'. The Vorlons had arrived and from what Demon could tell, they had used the Triluminary on some of the survivors, changing them genetically in the same way as they had changed her and her sisters. In this case, however, they had not adapted those people to give them mental powers and abilities, but had altered their physical structures, making them more resilient, with a higher tolerance for the cold climate they now had to endure.

Demon wondered why the Vorlons had done this, knowing that, as a species, they

always expected a return on any investment they made in the younger races. Had they, too, wanted the mineral wealth of this planet, and needed workers to exploit it for them? Then why had they left, and never returned? She sighed as she realized that it was unlikely she'd ever find the answer to that question.

Celona finished her story, saying, "They told us they would come back one day. They said we could help them fight the darkness and that our reward would be a new world, where we could thrive and prosper. We've been waiting for a thousand years, but they never came back." Her voice was forlorn, showing all her disappointment at the long wait her people had endured. Then she brightened as she looked at Demon, saying, "But now you've brought back the Light and promised us a new home. We only want to know how we can help you fight the darkness, so we can be worthy of our reward."

Demon sighed, wondering how much she should tell these women. Should she tell them the war was over? That the Vorlons had left the galaxy, and had gone beyond the Rim. That these people had been abandoned, in the same way as she and her sisters had been left behind, to fend for themselves. She decided it would be too cruel. Why should others suffer as she and her sisters had, when they had awoken from their long sleep to find everything familiar to them gone? Then an inspiration struck. Demon knew how she could use the priestesses' own prophecies to everyone's advantage.

She smiled gently at Celona, saying, "The darkness you must fight is the one you carry within you. It's the darkness of hatred and discrimination you must overcome. When all members of your society are free and equal, then you will have earned your reward of a new home." It wasn't a lie. Demon believed wholeheartedly in every word she'd said.

Demon saw Jackson raise her eyebrows, then half smile in admiration at the creative use of the truth. Celona's eyes opened wide, as she stammered, "But...but...does that mean...have we delayed...I mean, is it because we have treated our males as inferiors that the Light didn't come back? Did we do this to ourselves?"

Demon didn't reply, just smiled sorrowfully, leaving the acolyte to draw her own conclusions. Celona sprang to her feet, saying, "I have to tell Latharr and the others!" She ran from the room.

Jackson started to laugh quietly. She moved to sit directly in front of Demon and grinned at her as she said, "You really are a witch, aren't you? You've just won us the mining rights we wanted, and given the priestesses another compelling reason why they should stop abusing their men. There's no way they can refuse,

now they think their Gods are on our side."

Demon smiled weakly, still feeling a little wobbly after her earlier collapse. "Just using the material provided, Lieutenant." She looked up at the two Narns who stood behind her, also grinning. "Now, I don't know about you lot, but I'm starving! That stuff Celona brought earlier didn't fill my stomach at all. I bet you two have some supplies hidden in those packs of yours, don't you? G'Tan always told me that Marines never travel without their favorite snacks. Come on, ladies, divvy up!"

Gideon closed his eyes and sighed. [Perfect. My last mission turns into a complete fiasco.] He didn't want Moren to see how disturbed he was, but every instinct was screaming at him to get out of there. He felt as if the walls had just closed in around him, and all his earlier foreboding about this place being a trap came rushing back.

The Captain straightened slowly, saying, "I have to tell you, Moren, this is not good news. The ISA and the Drakh are not exactly friendly toward each other. I'm going to have to go back to my ship and..."

Before he could complete his sentence, G'Tan hissed from the doorway. "Someone's coming. Not human. Heavier."

Gideon turned to Moren with a quizzical look. The rebel leader looked surprised. "I told my people not to disturb us; that I wanted to speak to you alone. They wouldn't..." he trailed off, his face a picture of dismay, before he swallowed and went on. "It must be one of the Drakh. Only they would ignore my instructions."

"Is there another way out of here?" The Captain asked quickly, but he knew the answer before Moren shook his head. Gideon turned on the rebel leader, his voice full of accusation. "This was a trap right from the start, wasn't it? You never intended to negotiate, did you? You were just setting us up for the Drakh."

Without waiting for a reply, Gideon turned to look at G'Tan. The Narn Marine had his PPG rifle raised, and was scanning the corridor outside. Overriding Moren's protests of innocence, the Captain ordered the Narn to back off. "Let's see if we can talk our way out of this first, G'Tan. Cover the door from over there." Gideon pointed to a shadowy corner of the cavern, where G'Tan wouldn't be immediately visible to anyone entering. The Captain moved to stand in front of the door, attracting attention away from G'Tan's position.

The sound of footfalls became louder, and Gideon's worst fears were realized, when a figure moved into the light in the doorway. It was a Drakh Master. The scaly face and horned crest were unmistakable. Gideon would never forget his first encounter with these aliens, when he had captured one of their Captains on Ceti 4, nor his last meeting with one of their representatives on Centauri Prime. That time he'd been lucky to escape with his life, and then only because of Deborah's hidden Vorlon passenger. He wondered if he was going to be so lucky again.

When the Drakh started to speak, the grating syllables sent shivers down Gideon's spine, each sibilant a snake's hiss. "A visitor from the ISA?" The alien obviously recognized the Earthforce insignia on Gideon's jacket. "Introduce us, please."

Before Moren could speak, Gideon interrupted, ensuring the Drakh's attention was focused on him, and not on the Narn lurking in the shadows in the corner.

"No introductions are necessary." It took all Gideon's control not to hiss back at the Drakh. "I have advised Moren that I will need to seek instructions from my government. We'll leave now, and return later." Gideon started to move forward, hoping that Moren would keep his mouth shut and just let them leave. He knew he couldn't get that lucky.

"But Captain Gideon! We haven't..."

Moren's words were interrupted by a prolonged sizzle of sound from the Drakh. "Gideon? Every Drakh knows that name. Only one name--that of Sheridan--is more hated by my people." The Drakh moved to block Gideon's path.

Gideon raised an eyebrow and faked nonchalance. "I'll take that as a compliment and pass the news on to President Sheridan. He'll be delighted to hear it. Now, if you'll excuse me, the smell in here has become offensive." He moved forward again, stepping sideways to maneuver around the Drakh blocking his path.

The Drakh spat words at Moren. "If you take him captive and keep him for us, you will be amply rewarded. I would kill him now, but that would be too quick."

Gideon knew the Drakh could probably kill him with a single blow, but he realized that it was testing Moren, wanting to know how loyal the rebel leader was to his allies. The Captain half hoped that Moren would play along, promising to keep him prisoner for the Drakh, then releasing him later.

Before he could even look at the rebel leader, Moren shouted. "No! These people

have come to us in good faith, we..."

The Drakh's response was swift. Gideon hardly saw its hand move, but suddenly there was a weapon there. It fired, burning a large hole through the middle of Moren's chest. It happened so fast that the rebel leader didn't even have time to scream. His body hit the floor with a resounding thud, and Gideon found himself staring at the muzzle of the weapon that had fired the deadly shot, holding his breath as he watched the Drakh's fingers tightening on the grip.

G'Tan's shot hit the Drakh in the base of its neck, almost taking its head off. Like Moren, the Drakh didn't make a sound, other than the crash of its body hitting the ground. Unlike Moren, the Drakh was a lot messier about dying. The PPG rifle shot hadn't completely cauterized the gaping wound in the Drakh's neck, and dark blood flooded across the floor.

Gideon swallowed hard, trying not to gag at the smell from the bodies. Why did death always smell so foul? He looked at G'Tan, who moved forward rapidly and nudged the Drakh's body with his foot.

"Dead, I believe," the Narn growled.

"Decapitation will do that, though it's too bad we don't have a stake to drive through its heart. If a Drakh has a heart. Let's get out of here before his buddies catch up with us." With one last regretful look at Moren, Gideon went to leave, only to find that G'Tan had pushed in front of him.

"Tsk ts, Captain. You know the drill. Don't get pushy."

Gideon laughed softly, and waved the Narn forward. "OK, you take point, I'll do rearguard. To be honest, I'm not sure there's much difference. Chances are, we'll both get shot this time."

G'Tan grunted his agreement and led the way.

Much to his surprise, Gideon found that the way back to the shuttle was clear. Sheltering in the entrance to the cave system, he scanned to the right of the open ground between the entrance and the shuttle, knowing that G'Tan was doing the same on their other flank.

The Captain whispered, "All clear on this side."

The Narn grunted, acknowledging the Captain's report and confirming that his

side was also clear. Gideon continued, "There's no cover between here and the shuttle. We'll just have to run for it." Another grunt from the Marine Sergeant. Gideon decided that the Narn was saving his breath for the sprint. "Go!"

Gideon ran flat out, aware of G'Tan at his shoulder, protecting his back. He knew that the Narn could have overtaken him easily, but also knew that G'Tan would die before he left his Captain behind. Well, that went both ways. They surged up the ramp together, Gideon hitting the lock control with the palm of his hand as they arrived at the top. The few seconds it took for the scanner to read his print, confirm his identity and open the door seemed like an eternity. Just as the door lifted, he heard shouts behind them. They'd been discovered.

Gideon flung himself through the door, and into the pilot's seat, with G'Tan half a breath behind him. The engines came on-line the instant the Captain hit the controls and he grabbed the control stick, pulling it hard back in his haste to get off the ground. It wasn't the most elegant or safest way to get a shuttle into the air, but the 'jack rabbit' maneuver had saved lives before, and Gideon was hoping it would save theirs now. The shuttle lurched upward, and he was pressed back into his seat hard by the g-force of the take off. There had been no time for him or G'Tan to get their safety harnesses fastened.

The shuttle shuddered to one side, and Gideon realized they'd been hit by some sort of energy weapon. He yelled, "Guns!" at G'Tan, receiving the Narn's terse acknowledgment as he fought the controls. Somehow, he kept them airborne, translating their vertical motion into a horizontal surge forward, as soon as he had enough altitude. The sudden change of direction threw both Gideon and G'Tan back in their seats, and the Captain barely hung onto the control stick.

G'Tan growled, "Missed them! Warn me next time?" as he fired again with the rear guns at whatever enemy was behind them. Gideon hadn't yet had time to look and see who was chasing them.

"No promises!" The Captain yelled, as he threw the shuttle into a fast downwards spiral, skimming the edge of the mountain, pushing the shuttle to its limits. A quick check of the rear scanners showed they had two pursuers. [Oh, fuck!] The Captain sighed to himself, as he recognized the configuration. Drakh fighters. One Earthforce shuttle was no match for them. They couldn't outrun or outgun their opponents, nor could they call for help, as the planet's magnetic field blocked all communications.

The shuttle bounced again as they took another hit, and Gideon just managed to keep the nose up and stopped them hitting the mountainside. He knew it was only a matter of time. The fighters were both faster and more maneuverable

than the shuttle, but that didn't mean he had to make it easy for them.

G'Tan continued to fire the rear guns, and Gideon almost cheered when he saw one of the fighters explode behind them, but it was too little, too late. A loud explosion from the rear of the shuttle, which threw them forward, and the control stick dying in his hands, told the Captain that they'd lost their engines. He heard G'Tan rumble, "This is another fine mess you've gotten me into."

Gideon's last thought, as the mountain came up to meet them, was that he'd never known the Narn was a fan of Laurel and Hardy.

Demon stood motionless on the battlements of the castle, peering out into the gathering gloom. Matthew had promised he would return before nightfall, so where was he? Glancing behind her, Demon could see the large, glowing, orange globe of the sun balanced on the horizon, casting long shadows across the plain. As she stood looking east, she could see her own shadow, elongated on the ground, seeming to reach out toward the mountains where Matthew had gone. Demon raised her arms and watched as her shadow did the same, reaching, stretching, longing for the return of her husband.

The cold was severe, and the tall blonde shivered, then she pulled her scarf up further over her nose and mouth, before stuffing her hands back into her pockets. No'Kar's soft voice came from behind her. "You're cold. We should wait inside. At least you'd be out of the wind."

Demon shook her head. "He'll be coming soon. Any minute now, we'll see the lights of the shuttle, and then a few minutes later he'll be here. It won't be long now." She shivered again and hugged her arms tight to her side.

The Narn Marine didn't reply, but Demon heard her soft sigh of exasperation, and knew she was being unreasonable. As long as she remained out in the cold, No'Kar had to stay with her. The Narn had been ordered to guard Demon and nothing would prevent her from carrying out that order, certainly not a biting wind.

Another glance behind showed Demon the last sliver of the sun sinking beneath the horizon, leaving only an orange glow to provide light. The shadows reaching across the plain merged into the surrounding darkness, then the light was gone. It was full dark, and there was still no sign of Matthew's shuttle.

The fears and doubts that had been skirting the edges of Demon's mind for the

last half hour now flooded through into the forefront of her thoughts, breaking the dam of control she'd been holding in place. Matthew never broke his promises. If something had held him up, he would have found a way to get a message to her. He'd know that she would worry, that she'd miss him and would be eagerly awaiting his return. He'd know all of that, so why no message? Demon tried to tell herself that the communications problems on this planet might have prevented her husband getting through to the castle, but she knew that he'd made contact with the rebels from here the previous day, so he should have been able to get a message back in the opposite direction.

The thoughts and worries churned around in Demon's mind as she stood, still as a statue, facing the direction where Matthew had gone. She hardly allowed herself to blink, fearing that if she did so, she might miss the first spark of light indicating his return.

Her total focus on the darkness in front of her prevented Demon noticing Jackson's approach, until she heard a quiet voice. She started, and reluctantly looked around, to see the Lieutenant standing behind her. Jackson's dark uniform and dusky skin merged into the night, and Demon could only just make her out. The Lieutenant's emotions were another matter.

Demon couldn't help picking up on Jackson's feelings, as they were so strong. The Lieutenant was trying to control herself, but she was broadcasting anxiety, fear, concern and most of all, grief. Demon swallowed hard, not wanting to let herself think about what could have provoked those feelings.

Jackson spoke softly. "Demon, there's been an accident."

Demon swung back to look out into the darkness, trying to block out Jackson's feelings, wishing she could block out the words, too. She didn't want to hear this. If she didn't hear it, it wouldn't be true, it couldn't be true.

Jackson's soft voice continued, "Latharr told me they received a message from the rebel group. Apparently, they keep one landline open for negotiations. The rebels told her that the Captain's shuttle..." Her voice broke, and she paused for a few seconds, regaining control.

Demon lifted her hands to her ears, trying to block out all sound. She heard her own voice whispering, "No, no, no, no..." She said the one word over and over again. She would deny it, not accept it, it hadn't happened. But hard as she tried to block out Jackson's words, they penetrated her panic and denial.

"The Captain's shuttle crashed soon after take off on his way back from their

base. They say the engines failed and it crashed into the mountainside."

Demon started to scream her denial. If she shouted loud enough maybe she could change it all: change the past, change the present, change the future. If only she could scream loud enough, Matthew would hear her. He wouldn't leave her, he wouldn't break his promise. He wouldn't be dead. DEAD. The word kept repeating in her head. DEAD. DEAD. DEAD. It was the one word she could never accept.

DEAD.

Matthew wasn't dead, he couldn't be dead, he would never leave her like that, he'd promised.

DEAD.

Demon continued to scream out in pain, hardly aware of Jackson and No'Kar taking her into their arms, holding her tightly.

DEAD.

She saw Jackson's face, contorted with grief, and Demon knew that her projections must have been overwhelming the Lieutenant and the Narn. The whole castle would be feeling Demon's grief but she didn't care. She wanted the whole planet to grieve with her. If Matthew had left her, if he had died, then the universe should mourn.

Jackson's final words somehow made their way into Demon's mind. "The rebels sent a rescue party but they say the shuttle is completely burned out. There was no chance anyone could have survived the crash."

Demon threw back her head and screamed so loud that the whole castle seemed to shake. She howled her loss to the cold stars and unleashed her grief on the universe. Then darkness came and swept her into oblivion.

Jackson lowered the tall blonde to the ground, tears streaming down her face as she looked up at No'Kar standing above her. She had never seen a Narn weep before, but No'Kar's face was streaked with tears.

"We need to get her inside. Can you carry her? I'll see if I can get those priestesses to get some heat into her bedroom. We have to keep her warm."

No'Kar nodded, then bent and easily lifted Demon into her arms, carrying her through the castle, with Jackson following closely, wondering how she could get a message to the Excalibur, now that the shuttle was gone.

Angel was roused from sleep by a whimpering noise. She sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes, for a moment unable to think where the noise was coming from. She waved the light on, and listened carefully. It was coming from her living room. [Marcus!]

The young witch leaped out of bed and grabbed a T-shirt, pulling it over her head before rushing through into the living room. Marcus was curled into a ball on her sofa, tucked into a sleeping bag. He was clutching Half-Ted tightly, whimpering and moaning in his sleep.

Angel moved quickly to kneel by the sofa, gently stroking the child's blond curls, crooning to him softly. The poor baby was having a nightmare. She smiled as she looked at the little boy, continuing to stroke his hair and making soothing noises. She had never been very fond of children, but this little scamp had wormed his way into her affections from the moment she'd first seen him, in the prison cell on Mars. Angel sometimes wondered where this love for her nephew had come from.

Was it because he looked so much like his father? That was dangerous territory, and she refused to allow her thoughts to go there. Perhaps it was more his mother's features that stirred Angel's heart. She loved her sister, and would do anything for her. The previous year, Angel had made the biggest sacrifice she could ever make for her sister, when she had sent Matt back to Demon. Tears threatened for a moment, as Angel remembered the few nights of comfort and love she had spent with Matt, but again she pushed the thoughts away.

Marcus' whimpers of distress became louder and Angel realized he was waking up. As the little boy's hazel brown eyes opened wide, she could see they were full of fear and panic. The whimpers became a word, repeated over and over. "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy..."

Angel leaned forward and pulled Marcus into her arms. "It's OK, Marcus. Mummy will be home soon."

Marcus started to struggle against her, his words getting louder as he said, "Mummy's sick. She's hurt, she's scared. Mummy's..." The words became incoherent sobbing, and Angel began to worry. What was Marcus picking up

through his link with his mother? She wished that her own link to Demon was still strong enough for her to find out, but since the Vorlon's withdrawal into sleep the previous year, their link had gradually diminished in strength, and could now barely operate within the boundaries of the ship.

Angel held Marcus tightly against her, and started to stand, wanting to get to the viewscreen, so she could call the bridge and ask if there was any news from the planet below. As she did so, Marcus began to scream and struggle wildly. Angel had no choice but to lower him back to her sofa and let him go. The little boy lay on his back and screamed, red in the face, tears streaming down his cheeks. Then he started to send.

His family knew that Marcus was developing into a receiving and projecting empath like his mother, but this was the first time Angel had experienced just how powerful the child had become. Waves of grief crashed down on her. Fear and panic threatened to overwhelm her, and she had to fight to stay in control.

She grabbed Marcus again, hugging him tightly, yelling to him, trying to get him to tell her what was wrong, but the little boy was hysterical. He just kept screaming and sending, until Angel's head pounded with pain. She thought she would go mad or her head would split in two, when she heard the door buzzer sounding.

Angel screamed at the door to open, and was relieved when John Matheson raced into the room, naked from the waist up, closely followed by Lily and Luke, both dressed only in robes. John joined her by the sofa, and placed his hands on the screaming child's head, then closed his eyes. Angel could feel the waves of calm and reassurance that John was trying to project into Marcus' mind. She knew he was strengthening their telepathic contact with his touch, but she also knew that John must be receiving the full force of the little boy's grief and panic. Angel watched as John's face twisted with pain, then felt arms closing around her, drawing her away from the sofa.

The young witch leaned against Luke's smooth chest, comforted by his arm around her, and by Lily's hand taking hers and squeezing it tightly.

"What's happened, Luke?" She looked up into the doctor's face, looking for answers that he didn't have.

Luke shook his head and hugged her gently. "We don't know. John woke first, then he woke us, telling us something was wrong with Marcus. John must have picked up on something, as we were halfway here before Marcus started sending."

Angel looked back at the sofa and saw that Marcus had stopped writhing around, and his screams had become a little less deafening. John's eyes were still tightly closed and pain etched his face, but little by little, the waves of fear and panic eased.

After a few more moments, both the screams and the projections stopped, and the room became quiet, the silence interrupted only by the occasional hiccup of distress from Marcus. Angel, Luke and Lily moved over to join John at the sofa, and Angel again took the child into her arms, rocking him gently. Marcus curled up into a ball, buried his head into her shoulder, and was asleep within seconds.

Angel looked at John, still kneeling on the floor, his head bowed and eyes closed as he breathed deeply. When he finally opened his eyes and looked at the others, they could all see the pain and loss in his face.

Whispering, so as not to wake the sleeping child, Angel asked, "What is it, John? What caused this? Is Demon all right?" Her fears threatened to choke her, but she controlled herself as best she could.

John's face was streaked with tears, as he looked around at his family. Luke and Lily moved to his sides, both putting their arms around him and hugging him tightly. Angel knew that they would be linking minds, sending John their love and support to help him through his pain.

After a few moments, John spoke quietly. "Marcus was picking up Demon's feelings through their link. I managed to make contact with her, just for a second, before she collapsed. Oh god..." His voice cracked, and he dropped his head into his hands, unable to speak for a moment.

Angel started to shake, then forced herself to stop, as she hugged the soft warmth of the child against her, drawing as much comfort from his presence as she gave. She looked from John to Luke and then to Lily, seeing that tears now filled their eyes, too.

"Tell me! What's happened?" Angel's voice shook and she feared the worst, but she had to know. Whatever it was, she knew it was bad, but it was better to know.

Luke swallowed hard, and his voice was a croak as he whispered, "Matt's dead."

The only thing that kept Angel conscious and sane was the child sleeping in her arms.

John allowed himself the luxury of one moment of grief, burying his head into Lily's shoulder, letting her waves of love and comfort envelop him. He knew he couldn't stay there long, he had things to do, things that couldn't be put off. God help him, he was now in command of this ship.

His mental contact with Marcus, and through him, with Demon, had been exhausting. John had never felt anything like the grief coming from the little boy. It had been overwhelming and it had taken everything he had ever learned from his Psi Corp training to subdue the child, and suppress his feelings, then to delete the memories of the grief and panic from Marcus' mind. It was against all the rules, but at that moment, John hadn't cared. He couldn't leave a child to suffer that sense of loss. John knew he had picked up just a part of what Demon was experiencing, and the scale of her grief appalled him. How could anyone survive that? How would he survive if he lost Luke or Lily? His grief threatened to swallow him up, when Lily's words slipped into his mind. [We'll help her, John. Whatever she needs, we'll give her. Somehow, we'll all get through this. I just don't quite know how...]

John looked up into Lily's amazing emerald eyes and saw they were filled with tears. He knew that she had loved Matthew, too. They all had, in their different ways. His loss was a gaping wound in all of their lives, but somehow they would have to find a way to heal that wound and go on. John hugged Lily tightly, and whispered, "We'll find a way. Together."

He looked up to where Luke sat on the sofa, holding Angel, who still had Marcus cradled in her arms. Reaching out, John took Luke and Lily's hands in his and squeezed them. Pulling himself together, he said, "Lily, can you stay with Angel and Marcus? Luke, will you check on our three in the crèche? With the shielding there, Dasha should have slept through this, but call me if he's awake and upset. When you've done that, report to landing bay. I want you to go down and find out what's happened. And do whatever you can for Demon." He watched as his partners nodded, and he felt their love for him flow through his link with their minds, giving him the strength to go on.

John stood, feeling as if the weight of the world had just dropped onto his shoulders. [Not the weight of the world, just the weight of command.]

"I'm going back to get dressed, then I'll break the news to the crew." He knew it had to be done, but he had never faced a harder task since he'd joined Earthforce.

[Damn you, Matthew! It wasn't supposed to happen like this! I wanted

command of the Excalibur, but not like this. Never like this.] John discovered that when his dream had become reality, it had turned into a nightmare. He told himself that in a few hours he'd give himself time to grieve properly, but for now, he had to keep going. That's what commanders did. That's what Matthew would have done.

Luke hung onto his safety harness, wishing the transfer from the Excalibur to the surface could be over. He felt as if the constant bouncing around had bruised every square centimeter of his skin, and he had to clench his jaws tight shut, to stop himself throwing up. It was so bad that he almost wished he'd taken the shot that he'd given everyone else on board. Almost. He shuddered, thinking that even this nausea was preferable to a shot.

Glancing around the inside of the shuttle, to take his mind off his queasiness, Luke decided that he had a good team on hand. Trace Miller was at the controls, doing his best to smooth out the turbulence, and Luke knew that Trace was the best shuttle pilot they had. Lieutenant Sangeetha Siddhartha sat in the co-pilot's seat. John had sent the next most senior female Earthforce officer on the Excalibur, to find out what had happened to the first landing party. The center seat was empty, but three Narn Marines sat stoically opposite Luke, their faces impassive. For a moment, Luke wondered what had happened to their Sergeant, G'Tan. It was almost certain that he'd been with the Captain. Had they died together? There was no way of knowing until they got down to the castle. The only information they currently had was what John had been able to pick up from his momentary contact with Demon.

The Captain was dead.

Luke shook his head, unable to believe those words, no matter how often he said them to himself. Matthew Gideon was dead. How and why were still a mystery, but John had told them that Demon's emotions left no room for doubt. Luke wondered how she would cope with her husband's loss. He had seen her reaction the previous year when the Centauri had tried to take her away from Matt, and she'd thought he was going to die. She had lost control completely, unleashing the Vorlon that lived inside her on the Centauri. Would her grief wake the sleeping Vorlon she still carried? Luke shuddered at the thought of what that would do to Demon. She would probably lose what was left of her mind, which would be little enough in the face of her grief.

*A particularly violent jerk roused Luke from his thoughts and he clenched his jaw tightly shut again. [You will *not* throw up!]*

Searching for further distraction, the doctor thought back to when John had made the announcement to the crew that their Captain was missing. Missing, not dead. John had refused to announce Gideon's death, without the evidence of a body in front of him. A stunned silence had settled over the ship. Matthew Gideon was the only Captain this crew had ever known. They had been struggling to come to terms with the fact that he would be leaving them, retiring the following month. But for him to be taken away like this...

Luke shook his head and closed his eyes, swallowing the tears that threatened every time he thought about their loss. One of the Narn Marines sitting opposite leaned forward and asked, solicitously, "Are you all right, Doctor? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Luke shook his head, smiling sadly. There was nothing anyone could do. He had lost his Captain and his friend, and the universe would never be the same.

"Where is she?" Luke asked Jackson, as soon as he reached the bottom of the ramp. The Lieutenant had been waiting for them, her Narn bodyguard at her shoulder. The doctor noted Jackson's shivering and wondered how long she had been waiting there, outside the castle, in the darkness and bitter cold. Two hours had passed since they had first picked up on Marcus' distress. Had Jackson been waiting out there all that time? If so, Luke was surprised she was still able to respond.

"This way." Jackson spun on her heel, leading them into the castle. They left Trace and one Marine in the shuttle. Luke, Siddhartha and their two Narn bodyguards followed Jackson and Ka'Van. As they entered the inner courtyard, lit by spluttering torches, a tall, imperious looking woman, who Jackson introduced as Latharr, intercepted them.

She nodded politely at Siddhartha, then turned her attention to Luke. Latharr's distaste at having to deal with a man was evident, but Luke gave her credit for at least attempting to be civil. "I have been advised that you are the person best qualified to treat Mrs. Gideon. We sent our best medics to try to help, but your people would not let them see her. Please let us know if we can be of any assistance." She bowed her head slightly, surprising Luke with her courtesy. He responded in kind and waited while she turned her attention to Jackson.

"We have tried to contact the rebel group again, to obtain further information about the incident, but without success. We have grave doubts as to whether this was truly an accident. Nothing those people do would surprise me. It is quite possible that they killed Captain Gideon and his companion deliberately. We will

advise you if we receive more information." With that, she swept back across the courtyard and disappeared into a dark doorway, leaving the group from the Excalibur standing alone.

Jackson beckoned the others forward, talking as she led them through an arch and down a shadowy corridor. "Let's get out of the wind. I'll brief you, Lieutenant, then I want you to go straight back up to the Excalibur, and tell Commander Matheson what we know. Not that we know much. The rebels tell us that the Captain's shuttle crashed, and that he and G'Tan were killed. We need verification of that, so we'll want a surveillance over-flight of the area. Probably best done with fighters. I'm going to try and persuade the priestesses to give us some ground support, and send in a search party." Jackson paused as they came to a heavy door, and she turned to look at the Lieutenant.

Siddhartha nodded and took the datapad that Jackson held out to her. Jackson said, "Everything I know is on this. Get it back up to Commander Matheson. Go." The younger Lieutenant saluted crisply and spun on her heel, departing with one of the Narn Marines following closely. The exchange between the two women had been totally professional. If Luke hadn't known better, he would never have guessed at their close and intimate friendship.

Jackson turned to Luke and spoke softly. "She's in here. She collapsed completely when the news came through. I never knew she could project that strongly..." Jackson trailed off, obviously still disturbed by the memory of those feelings.

Luke tried to reassure the woman, "Demon is a powerful empath. She keeps a pretty tight check on her abilities under normal circumstances, but this..." he couldn't finish his sentence.

Jackson finished it for him. "These are hardly normal circumstances, are they, Doctor?" She swallowed a lump in her throat and went on, "I left No'Kar with her, when I heard the shuttle's engines. We managed to get the priestesses to heat the room, and we've kept her warm and quiet. She was still unconscious when I left, and I guess she must still be out, or we'd probably be feeling her projections now." Jackson knocked quietly on the door and waited.

After a few seconds a voice said, "Yes?" from the other side of the door.

Jackson said quietly, "Marcus," and Luke heard a lock clicking back. The Lieutenant smiled sadly at him, saying, "It's a password the priestesses couldn't know or understand." Luke nodded as the door swung open, and he stepped through into the room beyond.

For the first time since arriving on the planet, he felt warm. A roaring fire had been lit in the grate, and heavy drapes hung at the windows, keeping out the cold wind. Candles provided a cozy, flickering light, allowing him to see that the room was otherwise sparsely furnished. A small table, a couple of hard chairs, and a bed that had been dragged across the room, leaving scrape marks on the stone floor, until it was directly in front of the fire. Furs were heaped high on the bed, and under those furs, Luke could just see Demon's golden hair and white face.

Pulling a scanner from his pocket, Luke strode across the room, and pulled back the covers so he could see Demon properly, aware that Jackson and the remaining three Narns held back, standing by the door they had pulled shut behind them.

Luke saw that they had put Demon into bed fully clothed, which had probably been best at the time, but now the room was warmer, the tall blonde was sweating. It was the only outward sign of life. Without the film of moisture on her forehead, Luke might have mistaken her for a corpse. Her skin was white as a sheet, and her breasts barely rose and fell as she breathed. A quick scan showed that she had a slight fever, her pulse was rather slow, and her blood pressure a little low. Nothing in the results gave Luke significant cause for concern, but he was glad he had come down anyway. If nothing else, he could be there for Demon, and give her some emotional support when she came round.

The doctor turned to the others standing by the door, and he called Ka'Van over. She acted as paramedic for the Narn Marines and she had at least some knowledge of human medicine. "Help me get her outer clothing off, will you?" With Ka'Van's help, Luke stripped Demon until she was wearing her T-shirt, underwear and socks, then they pulled the covers back over her, and he sat on the edge of the bed, watching her closely. There was little they could do now but monitor her and let her come round in her own time. Long minutes ticked by as they waited.

*Jackson and the three Marines sat on the floor, backs propped against the wall. No one spoke. Luke guessed they were all thinking about their memories of Matthew Gideon. Despite his quirks and his sometimes uneven temper, he'd been a popular Captain. His crew had always known that he would be there for them. Gideon had the reputation that he never left anyone behind. The crew of the Excalibur would not be happy if they couldn't recover at least his body. They would feel they had left *him* behind.*

Looking at the Narns leaning back against the wall, Luke wondered if they were thinking of their Sergeant. G'Tan had been a much admired member of the crew. His larger than life personality and dry sense of humor would be missed by

many. The doctor sighed to himself, wondering how they would all get through the days ahead. He looked at the pale woman lying motionless in the bed on which he sat, and knew that no matter how hard it might be for the rest of them, no one would take it as badly as Demon.

As he looked at her, Demon stirred. Her head fell to one side on the pillow and her lips moved. Luke leaned forward to catch the word she whispered, and swallowed to contain his own emotion as he heard her moan, "Matthew." He sat up straight again, and lifted his hand to gently push the hair back from Demon's forehead, waiting for her eyes to open.

She continued to mumble in her sleep, muttering the same name over and over, and it nearly tore Luke's heart apart. He took her hand in his and squeezed it, whispering softly, "Wake up, Demon. Come on now, you need to wake up."

Something in his voice roused her, and her tone changed. This time her voice was questioning, as she almost begged, "Matthew?" Luke realized that she had mistaken his voice for that of her husband, thinking it was him sitting beside her. Her eyes flicked open, and as she focused on the man sitting next to her, they filled with tears. A wave of loss and grief swept the room as she whimpered, "Matthew? Where's Matthew? I want Matthew."

Luke squeezed her hand again, not knowing how to respond. Once he got his voice under control, he said quietly, "It's Luke. I'm here for you, Demon. I won't let you go."

Suddenly, the tall blonde sat bolt upright in the bed. She swayed for a moment, then looked carefully around the room, taking in her surroundings. Once she had worked out where she was, she turned back to Luke, asking, "Where's Matthew? He should be back by now. Why are you here, Luke? What's going on?"

Luke's heart lurched as he realized that Demon had blanked it all out. She didn't remember that Matthew was dead. Luke shuddered as he knew what he had to do. He was going to have to tell her.

"No." Demon listened carefully as Luke spoke, then said the word softly but firmly. "You're wrong. He's not dead."

Luke sighed, and Demon could see how upset he was. She brought herself tightly under control and smiled sadly at him. "Don't be sad, Luke. It's a terrible mistake, that's all. He's not dead, just lost. We have to find him." She pushed back the

covers and tried to stand, but was surprised when her knees wouldn't hold her up, and Luke had to support her. Demon allowed him to lower her to the edge of the bed, then she smiled up at him again. "OK, so maybe I'd better get my breath back before I go looking, but just give me a few minutes, then I'll be ready." She paused, looking around the room at the others, none of who were moving. "Why are you all just sitting there? Matthew and G'Tan might be hurt. We have to help them!"

Luke's face was rigid with pain as he whispered, "Demon. This is denial. I understand why you're doing this, but you have to accept this. He's gone."

Demon surged to her feet, eyes blazing with anger, and this time her legs held her up. "How do you know that? Have you seen his body? Show him to me! If you're so sure he's dead, prove it to me!"

Luke shook his head, and Demon whipped round to glare at Jackson. "Don't you think I'd know if he was dead? I'd know it here," she thumped her chest, "and here," she tapped her skull. "I was stupid earlier! I let myself believe what Christina told me, but she was wrong, and you're wrong, Luke. You're all wrong! Why haven't you done anything to find him? Matthew would never leave you behind, why are you so eager to give up on him?" She was angry now, furious with these people who were abandoning her husband. Well, she didn't care! If no one else would go out and find Matthew, then she would do it herself.

Demon started to grab at her clothes, pushing Luke away as he tried to stop her. She struggled but couldn't fight both him and No'Kar, who moved forward to help the doctor restrain her. Demon unleashed the full weight of her fury on them, sending waves of anger while she screamed, bit and clawed at the hands holding her back. Within a few moments, her energy was drained, and she fell back into Luke's arms, pleading with him. "Let me go, Luke. I have to find him. Help me find him, please?"

Luke held her tightly against his chest, hugging her closely, but unable to reply. Demon could feel his grief, but she didn't care. She wanted Matthew and these people were stopping her getting to him. Jackson's voice from behind her attracted her attention away from the grieving doctor.

"Demon, calm down. I've sent a message to Commander Matheson, asking him to send fighters in to check the area. They'll see if there could have been survivors. I've asked Latharr to help us with ground search parties who know the terrain. We're doing everything we can. If the Captain and G'Tan are alive, we'll find them. Somehow."

*The words sounded good, but Demon sensed Jackson's underlying despair. She had given up. They had all given up on Matthew. Well, *she* wouldn't! She would never give up!*

Luke said softly, "When John sends another shuttle down, I want you to come back to the ship with me." Demon started to shake her head, but stopped when Luke continued, "Marcus needs you. He picked up all your grief and despair, when you first heard the news. He was badly shaken by it."

Demon's heart felt as if it would tear in two. She wanted to go to her son, to tell him that everything was all right, that his Daddy would come home soon, but she couldn't bear the thought of leaving the planet. She didn't trust anyone else to make sure they did everything they could to bring Matthew back to her. Demon knew she was probably being paranoid, but she could feel the emotions of the others in the room. They were acting as though this was a recovery, rather than a rescue.

"I'll link to him as soon as he's awake, and reassure him. Maybe Angel can bring him down here?" She wasn't hopeful that John would allow that, but she could be stubborn, too. Demon had no intention of leaving Inesbitrin without her husband at her side.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four T

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