

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

by *The Space Witches*



Demon won't leave until she knows...

Chapter 2

28th June 2273

Luke sighed. They had been arguing for hours and he couldn't shift Demon. She refused point blank to return to the ship. When Marcus had awoken in the night, she had linked to him, sending waves of love and warmth that everyone in the room had been able to feel.

Soon after dawn, Siddhartha had reappeared, telling them that fighters would be sent to over-fly the crash site as soon as there was enough light for them to see by. They couldn't rely on instruments because of the electromagnetic interference, but they would at least be able to carry out a visual inspection. It quickly became apparent that Demon wouldn't move until she had heard the results of this flight.

Luke took Jackson to one side and they agreed a plan. Jackson, Siddhartha and two of the Marines would go back to the Excalibur. Luke would stay with Demon, accompanied by Ka'Van and No'Kar, for as long as it took him to

persuade Demon to leave.

As Jackson left, Luke turned to look at Demon, who was now fully dressed and pacing the room. The doctor sighed, and hoped that John would be patient. He couldn't see any possibility of getting Demon out of here without Gideon himself taking her. Nothing less than her husband was going to make this witch move. She wouldn't allow this Avalon to become Gideon's last resting place.

John Matheson turned as the fighter squadron leader entered the conference room. The Drazi pilot shared all his species' usual truculence, but he was the best fighter pilot and the best squad leader they had on board. He was also an avid poker player, and had spent many hours at the table with the Captain, winning sometimes, losing more often, and developing a grudging respect and admiration for Matthew's card playing skills. Varzat would never admit it, but he considered the Captain a friend.

Waving the Drazi pilot into a seat, John outlined the mission. "I need you to take your squadron down to this area." He pointed to the map of Inesbitrin that was displayed on the viewscreen, with a tight focus on the rebel mountain stronghold. "The rebels told the priestesses that the Captain's shuttle crashed soon after leaving their base. Assuming they were headed back to the castle, that would put the wreckage in this area," John indicated a particularly mountainous region on the map, and sighed.

Varzat shook his head as he peered at the map. "It's not going to be easy to find. There are a lot of valleys, with a lot of trees. And you say our scanners won't work?" He looked back to the Commander, questioningly.

John shook his head. "Ankaren and his team are still working on it, but no luck so far. This is going to be an eyeball reconnaissance. You're not going to be able to contact us, either. As far as we can tell, communications are limited to line of sight only. The only alternatives are landlines. You'll have to keep your squad together, as you'll have no way to communicate with them once they're out of sight. You're also going to have to come back up above the ionosphere before you can contact the Excalibur."

The Drazi shrugged his shoulders and rose from his seat. "Don't say any more. Everything you tell me just makes the job more difficult. I think I'd better get started before it gets any worse."

John half smiled, then sobered quickly. He knew the Drazi took this mission

seriously, and that Varzat knew they were all relying on him and team. As the pilot turned to leave, John said quietly. "Find him, Varzat. We have to know one way or the other. Find him, dead or alive."

The Drazi turned in the doorway and gave the Commander a silent salute of acknowledgment, then left to organize his team.

Jackson stood behind the Captain's chair, watching the viewscreen, watching the crew, but mostly watching the man sitting in that chair. John Matheson's face was blank, but Jackson knew he was suffering. He had been waiting for her when she'd arrived back on the Excalibur, and she'd given him a complete update as they rode the bullet car to the bridge. He'd tried to send her off duty, but Jackson had reassured him that she was fine for another few hours. She knew that she would never be able to sleep before the fighters reported back, anyway.

Varzat and his squad had left just before Jackson had returned, over an hour before. Since then, they had heard nothing. There was nothing they could do, only wait for the fighters to reappear above the ionosphere and report.

Jackson glanced over at the sensor station and saw that Ankaren was still working there, with two of his team beside him. The Brakiri looked exhausted and Jackson wondered when he had last gone off duty. Had he slept at all since Commander Matheson had challenged him to find a way through the interference, over twenty-four hours before? From the way Ankaren looked, she didn't think he had.

Siddhartha was back at Communications, peering closely at her panel, while holding her headset tightly to one ear. Jackson touched her own earpiece, checking that it was tuned into the same comm. channel as Siddhartha's. She wanted to be sure they would both hear from the fighter squadron at the same time.

A crackle of static in Jackson's ear warned her that the channel was live. She held the earpiece closer and concentrated, saying, "Stand by," to Commander Matheson as she did so.

He turned in the Captain's chair and looked at her for a moment, then stood and strode forward, instructing sensors to focus the viewscreen on the source of the incoming communication. The view shifted, moving the planet down into the bottom right hand corner of the screen, with the black of space filling the rest of the view. A point of light emerged from the atmosphere, sparkling against the darkness, just as a voice sounded in Jackson's ear.

"Alpha squadron to Excalibur. Varzat reporting."

The collective sigh of relief from the bridge crew was audible. None of them had been sure if they would ever see the fighter squadron again. The eight pilots in the team had left knowing they were going into potentially hostile territory--territory that had probably claimed their Captain's life--and that there was a good chance they might never return.

Siddhartha's voice sounded in Jackson's ear, acknowledging Varzat and requesting his report, at the same time as Jackson advised Commander Matheson of the message. As she spoke, she watched the sparkles of light that were the fighters emerging from the atmosphere, and she counted.

There were only six points of light visible.

Varzat's voice in her ear confirmed the bad news and Jackson turned and reported to Matheson. "They lost two fighters. Shot down from the ground."

John Matheson's eyes closed for a second, and Jackson could almost feel his pain at the loss. The Commander's voice was expressionless as he said quietly, "Tell them to come home. I'll be in the conference room. Join me there when Varzat arrives and we'll do the debriefing together."

The second officer watched with concern as Matheson turned and left the bridge. She wondered how she would have coped in his position. She knew he would be holding himself responsible for the deaths of the two pilots they had lost. Suddenly, Jackson wondered if she ever really wanted command.

When Varzat entered the conference room, John immediately called for a medic. Blood trickled sluggishly from a wound in the Drazi's forehead. "You should have gone to Medbay, Varzat. I could have gone there for the debriefing."

The Drazi shook his head, wiping his hand over the wound and sneering at the blood he saw there. "It's nothing. I banged my head against the inside of my helmet when I was trying to avoid one of their missiles."

John waved the pilot to a seat, and gestured Jackson to sit alongside him. The Commander was holding himself tightly under control, not allowing himself to feel the guilt and pain of losing two of his people. [How did Matthew deal with this?] John asked himself, but he knew the answer. [Badly.] Matthew had carried the name of every crewmember lost under his command engraved on his

heart and mind. John now had two names carved into his own heart. Shin Hyundan and Marta Munoz would leave permanent scars there, and the pain from those wounds threatened to overwhelm John, as he joined Jackson and Varzat at the conference table.

The arrival of the medic to treat Varzat's wound gave John a few moments to get himself under control. Treatment with the regenerator only took a few seconds, then John leaned forward and instructed the Drazi to begin his report, pressing the control to activate the data crystal recording as he did so.

Varzat told them how he had taken his squad down through the atmosphere to the mountains and started their search. "You were right, Commander. Communications were line of sight only. We'd searched along several valleys, fanning out from the rebel base, when we were fired upon." The Drazi's face expressed his anger eloquently. "Whatever weapons they were using were powerful. The first shot took Munoz out. Her fighter was blown out from under her. She didn't even have time to eject."

His head dropped for a moment and John knew Varzat mourned the loss of his team member, although he'd never admit it aloud. Instead, he would make his team endure the Drazi mourning ritual, which involved imbibing copious quantities of illicit alcohol. John made a mental note to put Security on warning. They'd need to turn a blind eye to the small riot that was likely to take place in the fighter pilots' mess hall that night.

"We got out of that valley as fast as we could, and searched the surrounding area, but there was nothing. So I decided they must have something to hide. I took my squadron back in. Hyundan was flying point. This time they waited until we were all running down the length of the valley before they opened fire. One of their missiles got a lock on me and I couldn't shake it. Hyundan dropped back and underneath me, putting himself in its path. It took him out, instead of me."

Varzat stopped speaking and John looked at him carefully, wondering whether he should ask Luke to get one of the ship's counselors to talk to the Drazi. Then he remembered that Luke was on the planet below, out of reach, and a wave of loss and loneliness swept over him. He missed his partner already, and gave silent thanks that Lily and the children were still with him. What would he have done without them? How had Matthew survived this job alone for so many years? John pushed that thought aside. It was too soon to think about Matthew. The wound was still too raw.

After allowing the Drazzi a few moments to recover, John asked quietly, "Did you see anything in that valley that might explain why they were so eager to keep you out?"

Varzat shook his head. "The only thing we saw was the burned out wreckage of the shuttle. I have to tell you, Commander," the Drazzi pilot paused and looked sadly at John, before continuing, "I don't see how anyone could have survived that wreck. The shuttle was spread across the mountainside, and all we could see was burned and twisted metal. No one could have walked away from that."

John swallowed hard. He told himself that Varzat could only have done a cursory inspection from the air. They still needed an inspection of the site from the ground. Thanking the Drazzi for his report, John dismissed him and was turning to leave the conference room when Varzat's voice stopped him.

"One thing did puzzle me."

John turned and looked quizzically at the pilot.

"Didn't the report say that the shuttle had crashed close to the rebel base?"

John turned to look at Jackson, raising an eyebrow in query. Jackson nodded. "Latharr told us the message from the rebels indicated the engines had failed soon after take off. Why?"

Varzat frowned. "That valley was easily fifty klicks from the base. How did the shuttle get that far, if the engines went out so quickly?"

The Drazzi looked from John to Jackson and back again in the ensuing silence, then he saluted and left the conference room. John looked at Jackson and spoke softly.

"It looks like we have some questions that need answers. Even if Varzat is right, and no one could have survived that wreck, I want to know if it was an accident or whether they were shot down. I hate to say this, but I think you'd better go back down there. Maybe we can get those priestesses to help us with a ground search, while we provide some air cover. Take every Marine we have left on this ship, and organize the search down there, Lieutenant, then get back up here. I don't believe the fat lady has sung yet."

John left the conference room, knowing the Jackson was looking after him as if he'd gone mad. As he walked past the map table, he said softly, "Look it up, Lieutenant, look it up." That's what Matthew had made him do, the first time

the Captain had used that expression.

John wasn't looking forward to the next task that faced him. He had to tell the President what had happened, and somehow persuade him to allow the Excalibur to stay and continue the search for the body of their lost Captain. John hoped his powers of persuasion were up to the job. Matthew was a hard act to follow.

2nd July 2273

Demon watched as John Matheson walked down the ramp from the shuttle. She had known this was going to happen sooner or later, but she'd hoped it would be later.

John wore a heavy, insulated jacket over his uniform, and a woolen hat covering his hair and ears. He had his hands stuffed into his pockets, but he still shivered in the cold morning air. Demon half smiled to herself. John didn't realize that this was one of the milder days on Inesbitrin; at least the wind had dropped. From the color of John's skin, Demon assumed that he'd taken one of Luke's anti-nausea shots. John certainly didn't have the green tinge to his face that the arrivals who'd refused their shots showed after the journey down.

Luke stepped forward to greet John, and the two men embraced. Demon knew that in their moment of contact, John would have linked minds with Luke, allowing them to silently exchange both information and their abiding love for each other. Luke had tried to hide his loneliness during the past few days, but Demon knew how much he had missed his family. Almost as much as she missed Matthew.

The tall blonde swallowed hard, clamping down on her emotions. She had to stay in control. She knew there was only one reason why John would come down to visit them, and she was going to fight him every step of the way.

Demon had been standing on the battlements of the castle, looking east, when she had seen the shuttle descending. She had stood there during every hour of daylight for the last four days. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if she was...she pushed that thought away, not even allowing herself to think about the possibility that she might be pregnant. Her legs were tired and her feet sore, but Demon refused to leave her post on the castle walls. She was determined to be the first person to see Matthew come home. [He promised. He promised he'd never leave me. Matthew would never break a promise.] Again, she tightened her grip

on the feelings that threatened to overwhelm her.

After a few moments, John and Luke separated, and John turned to Demon, smiling sadly. "It's good to see you again, Demon." He half laughed. "I say 'see' you, but I have to admit, I'm just guessing it's you under all those layers."

Demon pulled down the scarf that covered her face and smiled sadly. "Yes, it's me. It's good to see you too, John, but I have a nasty feeling it won't be good to hear what you have to say."

John sighed, then held his hand out to her, saying, "Maybe not, but let's talk inside. It's freezing out here!"

Luke led them back into the castle, across the courtyard, to the room he and Demon had shared for the past four days. The priestesses had at first looked scandalized when Demon had asked them to put another bed in her room. She had advised them that her doctor needed to stay near her, to ensure her continued good health. If the priestesses weren't willing to put the extra bed in her room, she would have to share her own bed with Luke. The additional bed had appeared within minutes.

Demon had tried to persuade No'Kar and Ka'Van to join her and Luke sleeping in the room, but they had refused. They had insisted that they returned to their own room every night, but Demon didn't believe a word of it. She was sure the two Narn Marines spent the nights outside her door. Every morning, she had opened the door to find them standing there, and had invited them to join her and Luke in the warmth of their room for breakfast. Each day, No'Kar had then followed her to the battlements, standing at her shoulder, unmoving throughout the day. G'Tan had ordered No'Kar to protect his Captain's wife and the Narn Marine was determined to follow those orders to the letter.

John sighed with relief on entering the bedroom, inhaling the warm air with pleasure. He immediately rushed over to where the fire burned brightly in the grate. The fire had been kept burning day and night since they had arrived, keeping the room warm and cozy for the human occupants. John pulled off his hat and gloves, and held his hands out to the fire, warming them, as he said softly. "Demon, you have to come back to the Excalibur."

They were the words Demon had been dreading. She could only make one response.

"No."

Luke sighed as he watched the two combatants. He loved Demon dearly, but she could be a stubborn witch when she wanted to be, and right now was one of those times. John was banging his head against a brick wall. A tall, blonde, beautiful brick wall, but he wasn't making a dent.

*"Demon, we've sent fighters into those mountains every day for the last four days. I'd send shuttles, but the places they can land are few and far between. The fighters can't get near the crash site. Every time they get close, ground forces open up on them, with weapons we've never seen before. We haven't lost any more pilots yet, but it's only a matter of time. I *can't* risk any more lives on this, and you know damn well that Matthew wouldn't want me to."*

Demon's face was stony and Luke didn't even see a flicker of reaction to John's words. Her voice was flat and toneless as she replied. "Then stop sending them. We'll wait for the ground forces to report back."

Luke knew that Demon had tried to accompany those forces on their search, but Latharr had refused to allow her to go. It seemed that the 'Child of the Light' could not be allowed to risk herself in that way. Demon had been prepared to go to battle on that one, but the Priestess had stopped her in her tracks. Latharr had declared that if Demon insisted on accompanying the search party, none of her people would go with them. The Excalibur Marines would have to go without local guides. Demon had been forced to acknowledge that this would significantly reduce the chances of success, and she'd had to back down.

Luke tried not to smile at the memory. [I just wish Matthew could have been there to see it.] The doctor sighed to himself. If Matthew had been there, the issue would never have arisen.

The search parties had set out within hours, every Excalibur Marine accompanied by a local. So far, only one message had come back, saying that they were entering the mountains, and had met no resistance. Luke knew it could be days, or even weeks, before they heard more news, and so did Demon.

John obviously knew this, too. He shook his head. "Demon, it's taking too long. The fighters have been tracking the search parties. They're no more than twenty clicks into the mountains. At this rate, it will be at least another week before they even get to the crash site, assuming they meet no resistance. Then they have to get back."

He moved across the room and took Demon's hand, leading her to the bed, where

he pushed her down to sit on the edge, then joined her, still holding her hand tightly. "Demon, I know this is hard, but even if Matthew and G'Tan survived the crash, the chances of them still being alive are remote. The chances of them staying alive for another week are non-existent. If Matthew was still living, he'd have found a way to contact us by now. I know you don't want to believe this, and God knows, I don't either, but we have to accept that he's gone. He's not coming back, Demon."

Luke watched as tears filled Demon's eyes. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "But he promised, John. He promised he'd never leave me."

John squeezed her hand tightly. "And if there was any way for him to keep that promise, I know he would. But he can't, Demon. We've lost him."

Demon's eyes flashed and she wrenched her hand away from John, leaping to her feet and running across the room. She turned with her back to the wall, looking like a cornered animal, as she almost snarled, "No! I won't accept that! Show me his body, then I'll believe you, but until then, I'll keep looking. I won't give up on him. He'll come back to me, John. I know he will. He's not dead!" The last words were a shriek of denial, and Luke rose, moving to calm the frantic, grieving woman. He approached with his arms open, and Demon flung herself at him, tucking her head into his shoulder, taking refuge there against the cruelty of her situation.

Luke looked at John, still sitting on the edge of the bed, his face and posture a picture of despair. The doctor stroked Demon's hair, comforting her, asking quietly, "Can we give it a few more days? How much pressure are you coming under to leave?"

John shrugged. "Enough."

The room was silent for a while, then John sighed and stood. "I can get away with staying here for another few days, maybe a week, but that isn't the only reason Demon should come back to the Excalibur."

Luke felt Demon move in his arms, and loosened his hold on her enough to allow her to turn and look at John. Her tone was bitter as she almost spat, "What other excuse do you have for trying to make me leave Matthew behind?"

John's face showed how wounded he was by that accusation, and Luke couldn't let Demon get away with it. He shook her gently, saying, "Demon! That's unfair and you know it! John is doing everything he can and more. He's doing everything Matthew would have done in his position."

Demon glared at Luke for a second, then her face crumpled, and she turned to John with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, John. Oh god, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean that!"

John smiled sadly and held his arms out, and Demon ran back across the room toward him. They hugged tightly for a moment, then John pulled her back down to sit on the bed beside him, reaching out to wipe the tears that now flowed down her face. "It's OK, Demon. I understand." They held each other for a while, then John continued quietly, "Marcus needs you. Lily and Angel are doing their best, but he needs his mother. Come back to the ship, Demon. Come back to your son."

Demon thought her heart would break at John's words. She had linked with her son frequently in the past few days, as she'd stood on the battlements, watching. Marcus had been distraught when he'd first found out that his mother wasn't returning to the ship. Demon had explained to him that she had to stay and wait for his Daddy to come back, that Daddy had been delayed, but they would all be together again soon. She had sent warmth and love to her son, calming and reassuring him again and again that everything would be all right.

After a while, Marcus had seemed to accept this, although Demon knew how much he missed his parents. But how could she go back to him alone? How could she tell him that Matthew was gone, that his Daddy was never coming home? Demon couldn't face it. It was better if she stayed here, where Marcus could believe that she was still waiting for his father. If she went back without Matthew, Marcus would think it had all been a lie. And it wasn't a lie. It wasn't!

Demon shook her head and controlled herself. She was deeply ashamed of how she had lost control before. She looked hopefully at John, asking, "Will you let Angel bring him down here? Then he can be with me, while we wait for Matthew to come home. We'll wait together."

As she feared, John shook his head. She could feel his sorrow and regret as he said, "It's too risky, Demon. You know what the flight down is like. We've nearly lost shuttles and fighters in transit before now. I don't want the first one we lose to be the one carrying your sister and your son."

Demon drew in her breath sharply. She had almost forgotten how dangerous the transfer from ship to planet could be. John was right, she couldn't risk losing Marcus or Angel that way. But neither could she go back to the ship alone. She

shook her head sadly and looked at John, letting him feel her genuine sadness as she said softly, "I can't, John. I know it seems cruel, but I can't go back without Matthew. That would be far worse for Marcus."

Luke stood upright as John emerged from Latharr's rooms, into the courtyard. The doctor had been waiting, leaning against a wall, sheltering from the wind, as he waited for his partner. Joining him, the two men embraced quickly, then Luke asked, "How did it go?"

John shrugged. "Better than I expected. She was almost polite. She told me again how she and her people wanted to help in any way they could. I know damn well that she's only doing this because she's so desperate for us to get her people off this god-forsaken planet. I was able to tell her that the evacuation ships for her people are on the way, and should be here in another twenty days or so. That made her more polite, and she insisted that they're trying to comply with our requirements. She told me that they'd let you check up on their men?" He looked at Luke quizzically.

Luke nodded. "A couple of days ago. Physically, they're fit, healthy and well cared for, but they're treated more like prize breeding stock than people." He sighed, then glancing around to make sure they were unobserved, linked his arm through John's as they walked back toward the shuttle. "These women have a hell of a long way to go before they'll be able to accept their men as equals. I just wonder if they're really committed to trying."

John replied quickly. "Latharr is." When Luke looked at him quizzically, he stopped walking and turned to look at his partner. After a pause, John said softly, "Luke, I did something I shouldn't. It was wrong, but I had to know if Latharr was telling me the truth."

Luke looked at his partner in concern. John seemed really upset about whatever he'd done. "Tell me." He tugged on John's arm, pulling him into the shelter of the archway leading out of the castle. No one could see or hear them there.

John sighed. "I scanned her. I had to know if she was telling me the truth about the search for Matthew, so I scanned her."

Luke was taken aback. John was normally scrupulous about adhering to the rules for telepaths. Luke couldn't think of another occasion when John had deliberately flouted those rules. He sighed before saying quietly, "John, you did what you had to. Give yourself a break. You didn't do anything that Demon

hasn't done every day since she got here. You didn't actually read her mind, did you?"

John shook his head, vehemently. "No! I wouldn't do that! I just did a surface scan. Just enough to be sure she was telling the truth."

Luke smiled sadly, and pulled John into a hug, whispering in his ear, "Then let it go. If I had your abilities, I'd have done the same." John pulled back his head and the look of love and trust in his eyes nearly broke Luke's heart. He pulled his lover back into an embrace and whispered, "God, I've missed you. Every night I've dreamed of being in bed with you and Lily, holding you both, loving you. That bed in Demon's room is too damned big and empty."

*A wave of love swept over him, as John held him close, then he heard a soft chuckle as John pulled away and smiled at him. "One thing our bed on the Excalibur *hasn't* been these last few nights is empty!"*

Luke looked puzzled, wondering what John meant. His partner gave him a sad smile and went on, "The last three nights I've had all the kids in with me, while Lily has been with Angel."

Luke's heart lurched. He knew Angel would have taken Matt's death badly, and he hadn't even found the time to ask about her. He felt a surge of guilt, until John's hand squeezed his arm, and his soft voice said, "Don't. Lily's taking care of her. Angel held it together for the first day after we got the news, then she collapsed. She'd been trying so hard to be strong for Marcus that she forgot to allow herself to grieve and it caught up with her. But she's getting better. Lily has stayed with her, and she tells me that Angel is recovering, but it's going to be a long road. For all of us."

Luke could hear the sadness in John's voice, and put his arm around John's shoulder. "What about you? Have you given yourself time to grieve?"

John smiled sadly again, "Not yet, there's been no time. When I'm on duty I try not to think about it. When I'm off duty, I've got four kids distracting me. Don't worry, Luke, I will. I know I have to let it all out sometime, but I'd rather wait until you come home."

The love Luke felt for his partner nearly overwhelmed him, and he took John into a warm embrace, knowing that the telepath would feel all of his love. After a few moments, Luke stepped back and sniffed, wiping the tears from his face and asking, "How's Marcus coping? Demon doesn't say much, but I know she spends a lot of time linked to him."

John sighed deeply. "That little boy got a double dose of courage from his parents, as well as a double dose of stubbornness. He holds it together all day, toughing it out, pretending everything is fine, but at night..." Luke saw that John's eyes had filled with tears, and he was struggling to control his voice as he went on, "At night he curls up around Half-Ted, and he cries for his parents. The first night he stayed in our rooms, I felt him. When I went through, Dasha was hugging him, telling him not to cry, then Faylinn started crying, too."

John laughed sadly as he went on, "Of course, Naima couldn't be left out, so soon enough, I had four sobbing children on my hands. The only thing I could do was to take the lot of them into bed with me. It's a bit like sleeping with a litter of puppies, and I'm not sure if Half-Ted's remaining ear is going to survive this. It's looking pretty damn fragile right now."

Luke hugged John again, hearing his whispered words, "I wish you and Lily were both back in our bed." The two men held each other for a moment, then continued walking, out of the castle gate and down to the shuttle that waited to take John back to the Excalibur.

As they walked, Luke asked John, "No more luck in sensors or communications breaking through the interference then?"

John sighed. "Nothing. Ankaren, Siddhartha and their teams have been working double and triple shifts, but our instruments weren't designed for this. This interference is operating over bands that we didn't even know existed a week ago. Sometimes, I wish this was the Star Trek universe, where we could just reverse the polarity of the positronic flow between the warp coil generator coupling and the deflector array, or some other techno-babble crap, and suddenly everything would be perfect. Unfortunately, this is the real world, and," John paused and used an excruciatingly bad Scottish accent for his next words, "We cannae change the laws of physics." He dropped back to his normal voice, saying sadly, "Not this episode, anyway."

Luke laughed softly, and hugged his lover gently. "You watch too much TV. You've got to stop watching that stuff, it just depresses you."

John turned to smile into Luke's eyes. "I don't have a lot else to do when I'm off duty, not with you and Lily both away." Then for the first time, the doctor could see some genuine humor in John's face as he said, "I put it on for the kids. It's perfect for four year olds; just their mental age."

Luke laughed again and they continued to walk down the hill toward the shuttle. They stopped at the bottom of the ramp and John shivered. "It's damned cold

down here, but even that's preferable to the journey. God, I hate turbulence!"

Luke laughed softly. "At least you can take the anti-nausea shots. Don't complain."

John took his hand, and squeezed it for a moment. "So how are you doing? And how's Demon?"

Luke sighed. "Like her son, she toughs it out in the day time, and cries at night. She has nightmares, John. She dreams that she's back with the Vorlons and they're torturing her and her sisters. She screams in her sleep, and I get up and hold her, then she cries and calls me Matthew and..." Luke had to stop, unable to speak for the tears that blocked his throat.

John waited patiently, sending waves of love and reassurance to his partner. After a few moments, Luke collected himself and went on. "We don't talk about it in the mornings. I don't even know if she remembers. God, John, how are we going to put our lives back together again? How will any of it ever get better?"

The telepath shook his head sadly. "I don't know, Luke. I really don't know."

Demon sensed the Priestess ascending the stairs to the battlements, as she stood there, watching the lights of the shuttle's engines disappearing into the clouds. The wind had picked up again since the morning, and the clouds had gathered overhead, darkening the day into almost twilight, and lowering the temperature. No'Kar stood a few paces away, ever vigilant, never complaining about the long hours she and Demon stood out in the cold together every day.

It wasn't the first time Latharr had come to join Demon in her vigil on the castle walls. Several times during the previous four days, the Priestess had stood by Demon's side, staring out into the east. Each time, Latharr had tried to persuade Demon to join her in the inner sanctum, saying that their temple would be blessed by the presence of a 'Child of the Light'. Each time, Demon had refused, at first politely, eventually quite vehemently, telling Latharr that under no circumstances would she voluntarily set foot in that place again. The Priestess had wanted to know why, but Demon had refused to answer in detail, only saying that what resided in the temple could hurt her badly. Latharr had finally seemed to accept this, but Demon was still wary of what the Priestess wanted, whenever she came to the battlements.

"It will snow soon. You should come inside." Latharr's voice was full of concern.

Demon turned and smiled, saying, "I will. Soon." Then she turned back to look out across the moors, always hoping to see the search party coming over the hill, always hoping that Matthew would come back to her in the next few moments. The tall blonde did her best to block out the feelings of concern and confusion Latharr was radiating, but it was difficult when the Priestess stood so close by her side.

Glancing around, Demon saw that Latharr was also staring out into the gloom, a frown on her face. After a few moments of silence, the Priestess said, "I don't understand you. I know your attitude toward men is different to ours. I know that you value them more highly, but I don't understand why this one is so important to you. Surely, if he's lost, you can replace him? Another could be trained to warm your bed just as well, and give you as much physical pleasure."

Demon didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the Priestess' words. On the one hand, she had previously explained to Latharr the source of the 'projections' that had washed over the castle, during the night Demon had spent with Matthew there. The Priestess had been surprised at the idea that a man might give a woman so much pleasure, and Demon had sometimes been amused by the thought that Latharr's willingness to reconsider the role of men in her society could be related to this.

On the other hand, the memory of that night made Demon want to weep. She and Matthew had given each other so much. It had been one of the most incredible experiences of Demon's life, and a part of her wondered whether it would ever be repeated. The thought that she might never sleep with Matthew again, never hold him in her arms, never kiss him, touch him, love him...Demon swallowed hard and pushed all her doubts away. He was alive. He would come back to her. He must.

Almost unconsciously, Demon's hand moved to rest over her belly. She hadn't dared to check, and she hadn't allowed Luke to check, to see if she and Matthew had been successful that night. Had they created the new life they both wanted? Demon was torn, not knowing what to wish for. She desperately wanted Matthew's child, his daughter, but the prospect of having that child alone, without Matthew, terrified her.

She became aware that Latharr was looking at her quizzically, waiting for an answer. Latharr's eyes had moved to Demon's hand for a moment, as she rested it on her belly, but now moved back to meet the tall blonde's gaze.

Demon tried to smile, but the inner turmoil of her feelings was difficult to

control. She swallowed, and whispered, "I'm not sure I can explain. I love him, Latharr. If he doesn't come back..." Her voice cracked, so Demon swallowed again and continued, "I can't tell you in words how I feel about him, but I can share that feeling with you, if you'll let me?"

Latharr nodded, and for just one moment, Demon released her control. She allowed all her feelings for Matthew to flow out of her. Her love, her passion, her fears for him, her fear of living without him, but overwhelming everything else, her desperate need for him and her loneliness without him. For a moment, Demon released it all, and it nearly brought her to her knees.

Latharr gasped as the wave of emotion hit her, then reached out to support Demon as the tall blonde's legs trembled. No'Kar took a step forward, then retreated when she saw that Demon wasn't threatened. The three women stood in silence for a moment, as Demon collected herself, then she quietly thanked the Priestess for her support. Latharr nodded, releasing her, then said quietly, "I had no idea. I have never experienced anything like that. It makes me feel that something has been missing from my life. I love my daughters, but not like that, never like that..." She trailed off, unable to find words to express her sense of loss.

Another long silence developed, broken only by the whining of the wind over the moors outside the castle. Both women were lost in their own thoughts, staring out into the gathering darkness, until Demon heard Latharr sigh, then ask, "Do you have daughters, Mrs. Gideon?"

Demon started to reply, her mouth forming the word, "No," then she paused. Swallowing again, she controlled her emotions fiercely, as she whispered, "I don't know. Maybe." Her hand drifted back to her belly, but the Priestess just looked puzzled. Demon shook her head more emphatically. "No, no daughters. Just one son."

Latharr looked at the tall blonde, a pitying expression on her face. "A pity. A daughter would be a comfort in your loss. A son..." The Priestess shrugged, then nodded to Demon and left.

The tall blonde suppressed the anger she felt at Latharr's words, and turned to look back out over the barren wasteland that surrounded the castle. After a few moments, she became aware that No'Kar had moved to stand close to her side. Looking around at the Narn Marine, Demon smiled sadly. "You don't have to stay with me, you know. I'm quite safe out here."

No'Kar shook her head firmly. "I have my orders." She then looked down and

gestured toward Demon's belly. "When will you know?"

Demon realized that the Marine had understood her meaning, even if Latharr hadn't.

"When I have the courage to use this, and be sure." Demon pulled the small scanner from her pocket and held it up for the Narn to see. "All I have to do is to pass this over my belly, and if this light glows, I'm pregnant. If the light is yellow, it's a boy. If it's green, a girl. We want a girl. Matthew has been having shots for the last month to improve the odds. He doesn't like shots very much, but he really wants a daughter and..." Demon pulled herself up, realizing she was rambling. After a pause she went on, "Anyway, all I have to do is use the scanner."

No'Kar nodded. "But you're afraid to find out? Afraid that you are carrying his child, or afraid that you're not?"

Demon's anguish flowed into her words, as she cried, "I don't know! I want this baby so much, it might be all I have left of him, but the thought of carrying her alone, of bringing her into the world without a father, of raising her without Matthew by my side...Oh God, I can't do it alone, I can't!" Tears flowed down Demon's cheeks unchecked, and No'Kar took the tall blonde into her arms, rocking her gently, making soothing noises as Demon wept.

After a few moments, Demon heard the Marine whisper, "It is always better to face your fears. It is always better to know."

Demon knew she was right. Taking a deep breath, she backed away a step, and passed the scanner to No'Kar. "Here. Press that button."

No'Kar took the instrument and held it so Demon couldn't see the face, then ran it across her belly. The Marine studied the scanner, then looked into the tall blonde's face and smiled. "It seems you have a daughter, Ma'am."

Demon froze in place, looking over No'Kar's shoulder to the frozen moor. She didn't know how to react--what to say or what to feel. She felt numb, frozen, unable to respond. Then the implications of what No'Kar had just told her started to sink in, and Demon's knees gave way under her. She slowly slid down the wall of the battlements, whispering, "Oh God, Matthew, please come back to us." Then she wept.

9th July 2273

The second in command of the Drakh force on Inesbitrin signaled again. He knew it was useless. The equipment available to him would only just penetrate the ionosphere, and the ship wouldn't drop out of hyperspace for another day, perhaps two. Nevertheless he kept trying, as he had done every day since the murder of his commander by the ISA representatives. He knew that the Alliance ship was still in orbit, and he could only hope that it would remain there until the Drakh ship arrived. It could then be destroyed in payment for the Commander's life.

The Drakh signaled again, patient and persistent.

"Where's Demon?" John stared up at the battlements, looking at the place where he knew his Captain's widow had held her vigil for the past eleven days.

Luke sighed softly, saying, "Probably hiding. She was up there a moment ago. If she saw you leaving the shuttle, she'll know what you've come to tell her. That is why you've come down, isn't it?"

John nodded. "It's over, Luke. We have to leave. I recalled the search parties three days ago. They've all made their way back to places where they could be picked up, and the last group came back to the Excalibur this morning. The next shuttle will bring all the priestesses' people back to the castle." He waved at the horizon, where the lights of the approaching shuttle could be seen.

The two men walked slowly up the hill to the castle as they spoke. John shivered in the cold wind, wondering how his partner had coped with staying in this frozen wilderness for the past week and a half. He was dreading the confrontation that lay ahead of him, but at the same time, he was happy that his separation from Luke was nearly over. John and Lily had missed him so much. Their bed had felt empty without him, and every day the children asked where he was. It was time for them to become a family again. John just wished that Demon could have the same reunion that he, Luke, and Lily would soon enjoy, but that wasn't to be.

For days, John had resisted the idea that his Captain was dead. Every day, he'd argued with the President's office, resisting orders to move the Excalibur back to Minbar for the appointment of a new Captain. Every day, he'd begged for more time, and kept the search for Gideon going. Finally, three days before, John had run out of excuses, and he'd reluctantly recalled the search parties. Even then,

he'd gotten messages dropped to each group, telling them to search different valleys on their way back to the pick-up points, and he'd had fighters using every hour of daylight to fly over every valley they could get to. Earlier that day, the final shuttle had returned the last of the Excalibur crew to the ship. There was no further reason to delay their departure. Or rather, just one reason: a very stubborn, grief-stricken woman, so lost in denial that she refused to face the truth.

Matthew was gone. Those words tore John's soul apart every time they sounded in his head. He didn't want to believe them any more than Demon did, but he could no longer deny the truth. Matthew was gone and he wasn't coming back. Now John had to convince Demon of that, and it was probably going to be the toughest job he'd ever had in his entire life.

As they entered the courtyard, John felt Luke's hand rest on his arm, and he looked around at his partner. Luke's face was filled with sorrow and concern. "She'll never accept it, John. I don't know how you're going to make her leave."

John sighed deeply, hating what he had to do next. "I know a way. I just hope she doesn't make me use it."

Demon huddled by the fire in her room, waiting for the axe to fall. As soon as she'd seen John emerge from the shuttle, she'd known that the time had come. She'd known why he had come back to the planet. She had run from the battlements, somehow trying to hide from the truth, trying to run away from what would happen next. No'Kar had followed her, eventually catching Demon in the archway on the far side of the castle, and holding her.

The Narn woman's sorrow had been clear in her sad, red eyes. "You can't run away from him, or what he has to say. You've known that this day would come. It was inevitable. Come back and face it."

Demon had struggled in No'Kar's grip, trying to deny her words, trying to get away, but eventually falling against the Narn Marine and weeping softly.

"I can't go back, No'Kar. I can't leave Matthew behind. I promised Marcus I'd bring him home. Every day, my son has begged me to come back to the ship, and I've told him that I had to wait for his father. How can I face Marcus alone? I'd be breaking my promise."

No'Kar had held her gently while she wept, and after a few moments, said

softly, "Your son needs you to go home."

The words had cut through Demon's soul, as she'd remembered how years before, she had told Matthew, "...now my home is wherever you and Marcus are."

Then a wave of guilt had swept over Demon. Neither Ka'Van nor No'Kar had said anything to her, but she knew they both grieved for G'Tan and they both missed their families. They, too, had children on the Excalibur, children who would be missing their mothers, and the Narn children didn't have the benefit of the mental link Demon shared with her son. The pouchlings had received nothing more than notes from their mothers for eleven days. Demon had tried to persuade the two Narn females to return to their families, to allow themselves to be replaced. Both had refused, saying that G'Tan had given them their orders. Despite Demon's stubbornness having kept them from their children, in all that time, not one word of recrimination had passed the Narns' lips.

Demon had straightened and shaken her head sadly. "I'll go and listen to what John has to say, but..." she had left her sentence unfinished, and had made her way back to her rooms.

The sound of the door opening attracted Demon's attention away from the flames of the fire and her memories. She turned to watch Luke and John enter the room, and for a moment she was overwhelmed with sadness that the sight of the man she had always thought of as a friend should cause her so much pain. Demon wondered whether her friendship with John could survive the next few moments.

"No."

John was sick to death of hearing that word. "Demon, how many times do I have to say this? 'No' is no longer an option. You have to come back."

The tall blonde looked as stubborn as he'd ever seen her, as she replied, "No, I don't. I won't. Not until I find Matthew." She leaped to her feet and started pacing the room, her face set with determination. For a moment, John was reminded of Matthew, remembering how his friend had always paced when disturbed or angry. He'd never noticed before that Demon had the same habit.

After a few moments of silent pacing, Demon stopped abruptly, and walked over to where John sat, falling to her knees before him. The sight of this proud

woman preparing to beg broke his heart. He lifted his hand and stroked her hair, whispering, "Please, Demon, don't..."

She interrupted him before he could finish. "John, I beg of you. He's out there somewhere. He's not dead. Can't you believe that I'd know if he were dead? Wouldn't you know the instant Luke or Lily died? Wouldn't something inside you break? Wouldn't a part of you die in the instant of their passing?" Demon placed her hands on John's knees and lowered her head to rest on them, as she sobbed.

John rested his hand on her head, sending his thoughts into her mind, so she could know the truth of his thoughts. *[I loved him, too, Demon. If there were any way that he could be alive, any way to find him...]*

Demon raised her head, and John saw the tears streaming from her reddened eyes. A wave of anguish and guilt swept through him as she sent back to him, *[Oh god, John, don't! There was a way. I could have found him, before. If the Vorlon inside me was still awake, I could use its power to merge with my sisters and find him. But I was weak, and I couldn't live with it. I had to let it sleep and now I don't have the power and I've lost him. Because I was weak, they've taken him away from me.]*

John slid off the chair and knelt on the floor with Demon, holding her while she sobbed, trying to soothe her guilt, while he wondered if she was right. They would never know.

When Demon's sobs diminished, John whispered, "You have to come back to the ship. We have to leave, Demon. Unless you want to be left behind here, you have to come back." He hated having to threaten her in this way, but it was the only way he could get her to return to the ship.

Demon's face showed her shock at his words. "You wouldn't...you couldn't...John, you wouldn't leave without me, would you? What about Marcus? How could you?" Her eyes filled with tears again, and John's guilt nearly overwhelmed him.

"I have no choice! Believe me, if I could stay, I would. My orders don't leave me any more room to maneuver, Demon. We're out of time." His voice expressed his anguish at what he had to do, and he allowed free expression to the full scope of his remorse, knowing that Demon would feel it, and hoping that it would help her forgive him.

She raised her hand to his face and wiped away the tears that he hadn't known he'd shed, saying softly, "Oh John, I'm sorry. I wish I could find him, for all of

us who love him. I wish I still had the power to..." Demon stopped in mid-sentence, and John watched as her face changed. It was like watching a sunrise within her. Suddenly, her eyes widened and sparkled. All the grief and pain were washed away, and she broke into a dazzling smile, as she said, "Maybe I do. Oh John, maybe I can find the power. Not alone, no, not alone, but maybe..." She stopped again, and John felt a wave of joy and hope wash over him.

"What is it? What power?" His words fell on deaf ears, as Demon leaped to her feet and ran around the room, gathering her things and stuffing them into a bag.

"Come on! We have to get back to the ship! I can't do it down here and I can't do it alone. Let's get out of here!"

John looked at Luke, then back to Demon, and the two men stared in open mouthed amazement as the tall blonde almost flew out of the room, trailing her bag behind her.

Gideon looked across at where G'Tan lay sleeping, and wondered how much longer the Narn could go on. He'd been injured in the shuttle crash, and the Captain had half dragged him out of the burning wreck. Gideon had been luckier. Having had his hands on the control stick when they'd crashed, he'd managed to use it to stop himself lurching forward in his seat. G'Tan had taken the full brunt of the co-pilot's controls impacting with his belly, and Gideon knew that the Narn had suffered internal injuries and bleeding. Only the Marine Sergeant's strength and willpower had kept him going for the last eleven days. Narns had lots of both, as the Centauri had found to their cost.

Sucking on a sliver of ice for moisture, Gideon looked warily out of the cave in which they were hiding, at the overcast gray sky. It looked as if it would snow later, which was not good news. They would leave traces in the snow, which their pursuers could use to track them. The cave was the best shelter they had found in days, and at least it protected them from the wind, if not the cold. Ever since the crash, they had traveled by night, resting and sleeping during the day, trying to evade their pursuers.

A mixed force of rebels and Drakh had been on their trail since they had abandoned the burning shuttle. The Captain had dragged the semi-conscious Narn into the shelter of some rocks as the shuttle exploded, raining burning wreckage all along the valley. Gideon had managed to grab the first-aid kit on his way out of the shuttle, but one of those bits of wreckage had landed on it,

damaging the scanner and regenerator beyond repair. Only the basic Band-aids and burn creams contained in the kit had survived, only those were available to tend his own and G'Tan's injuries.

For the eleven days since then, Gideon and G'Tan had been hunted, chased down by enemies, hiding by day, moving at night, climbing and scrambling from one valley to the next. As much as possible, they had tried to stay on a track back toward the castle, but it hadn't always been possible to travel in a straight line. The valleys didn't always lead to safety. Occasionally, their path had been blocked by enemy forces. Once, they had been lucky to escape with their lives.

Sometimes, Gideon's mind wandered from the harsh realities of his currently dire situation. Instead of wondering if he would survive the next encounter with the aliens, he imagined what would happen if they did. What reception would he and G'Tan get, if they did manage to get themselves back to the priestesses' castle? The Excalibur must have left orbit by now. How had the negotiations gone? Had Jackson and Deborah been able to do a deal with the priestesses? Would it be worth the priestesses' while to take care of the Captain and his Marine Sergeant, at least until the next ISA ship called at Inesbitrin?

Gideon had nightmares that the negotiations had fallen through, that the planet had been abandoned by the ISA, and the ships would never return. He and G'Tan could end up spending what little was left of their lives as slaves of the priestesses. Avalon could be Gideon's last resting place after all. The Captain shook himself to dispel such depressing thoughts, and looked over at his companion again, as the large Narn groaned softly in his sleep. The whole issue could be academic, anyhow.

On some days, they had seen and heard fighters flying overhead, but that had only happened during the day, when they had been forced to hide. There had been no opportunity to send a signal to the fighter pilots, letting them know where the Captain and Marine Sergeant were concealed. Even if they'd been successful in attracting attention, the places where a shuttle could land and pick them up had been limited. But there had been no fighters overhead for the previous two days. John had kept the search going a lot longer than Gideon would have believed possible, but he must have been forced to give up in the end. Gideon had decided that it was unlikely they would be rescued. He and G'Tan would have to get themselves out of this mess.

Looking over at the sleeping Narn, the Captain wasn't sure if they could make it. G'Tan had begged Gideon, more than once, to go on without him. The Narn knew he was slowing Gideon down, as often the Captain had been forced to

half-drag, half-carry the injured G'Tan up rugged hills, and through almost impenetrable passes. Narns had a pragmatic attitude toward death. They considered death from a friend to be far better than imprisonment by an enemy. Their long occupation and subjugation by the Centauri had taught them to prefer death to surrender.

Gideon had refused to leave G'Tan behind, telling the Marine that he was scared all the other Narns on the Excalibur would swear a Shon-Kar against him if he failed to bring their Sergeant back with him. The last thing Gideon needed was a Narn blood oath taken out on him. The Marine Sergeant had laughingly assured the Captain that this wouldn't happen, that his fellow Narns would be grateful that their leader had been spared the disgrace of capture and imprisonment.

Gideon had given the Narn a twisted smile and said, "But what about all those pouchlings of yours? Trying to support them all financially would bankrupt me." G'Tan had tried to laugh, but it had turned into a cough, and the Captain had been concerned to see spots of blood emerge from the Narn's mouth. He knew that if he didn't get G'Tan medical treatment soon, he would have no choice but to leave him behind, as he couldn't carry an unconscious or dead Narn over the rough terrain.

That possibility was torture for Gideon. If he was faced with choosing between life at the price of leaving G'Tan behind, or death by staying with the Narn, what should he do? He didn't want to die. He didn't want to give up the life that had become so good in the last few years. He had a wife and child he was desperate to see again. But he was Captain Matthew Gideon. He never left anyone behind. That was who he was, the core of his being. How could he go on living with himself if he abandoned his principles and beliefs, along with G'Tan?

Thinking of his wife and son made Gideon feel as if he'd had a stake driven through his heart. He knew that by now Deborah must believe him dead. The pain that would cause her would be overwhelming, and Gideon wasn't sure if she was strong enough to bear it, not when she was still so fragile following the events on Centauri Prime. The Captain cursed softly to himself. He didn't want his wife to have to grieve, to mourn, to suffer the appalling pain of separation and loss. He wanted to live a long and happy life with Deborah at his side. Was that really too much to ask? Apparently so.

Gideon sighed and pulled the Marine's backpack over to rest between his feet. It was the only other thing he'd been able to drag from the wreck. It was fortunate he had done so, as the pack had contained emergency rations, which although

not the most appetizing things Gideon had ever eaten, had kept the two of them going for the last eleven days. Looking at the few ration packs left, the Captain calculated that they had enough food for two more days. He knew there was no hope of them getting out of the mountains within that time frame.

The Captain dropped his head into his hands, fighting against the wave of despair that threatened to overwhelm him. He could see no prospect of getting out of this alive. It would be so easy to give up, to curl in a ball and stop trying. He was so goddamned tired. The physical strain of the last few days had been almost intolerable. The cold, the short rations, sucking ice and snow for water, and having to support his injured crewman had all taken a toll on Gideon. He wasn't sure how much longer he could go on, and without the prospect of his wife, his family and his friends waiting for him at the end of this ordeal, he didn't know where to get the energy or the courage to continue trying. Maybe he should give in to the exhaustion and the cold. Maybe he should just curl up and die.

G'Tan's quiet coughing roused the Captain from his torpor. He turned to see that the Narn had awoken from his restless sleep. Gideon smiled and held out an icicle, saying, "Your early morning coffee is delayed, so here's something to be going on with."

The Narn half-laughed as he took the icicle, but the laugh soon turned to a cough, and again, Gideon saw the spots of blood on G'Tan's sleeve, as the Narn wiped his mouth. The Captain helped him sit up, supporting him as he coughed more blood, wondering how he could possibly get them home. It all seemed hopeless.

Then, for some reason he didn't really understand, Gideon suddenly felt a little better. Somehow, everything seemed a little less bleak.

Demon looked through the front viewscreen of the shuttle, silently urging the ship forward, wanting it to hurry, knowing that soon she would see the Excalibur ahead. She cursed herself for a blind fool. How could she not have thought of this before? Her delay could have been fatal for Matthew! She should have come back to the ship immediately he had been declared missing, and she could have found him at once. For a moment, Demon wished Max Eilerson was with her, to tell her in every language he knew what a fool she had been.

A sudden concern crossed her mind. Would the children be able to play their part in her plan? Was it fair to include them? They were still very young and what

Demon wanted them to do would be difficult. The tall blonde wondered if she, her sisters and John might be able to do what was needed alone. No. Deep down, Demon knew that without the Vorlon inside her, four would not be enough. They would need more. Despite the children's tender years, they were needed if Demon's plan was to work.

As the shuttle emerged from the ionosphere, she leaned forward against the seat harness, and spoke quietly to John, who sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"John, could you call on ahead? Could you ask Angel and Lily to meet us in the map room, and for them to bring Dasha and Marcus with them? Also, I need Angel to go to my rooms and get something that belongs to Matthew. Anything she particularly associates with him. Can you ask them to do that?" Demon's link to her sisters was diminished now. She could no longer link to them from a distance of more than a few hundred meters.

John half-turned in his seat and gave her a puzzled look, but he didn't question her, he just turned back and gave quiet orders to the pilot. Demon felt Luke lean against her from the next seat and she turned to look at him, as he asked quietly, "What are you up to, Demon? Just how do you plan to find Matthew?"

Demon knew that no one really believed her when she said Matthew was still alive. [But he is! He IS! And I'll prove it to them all. Just a little longer, my love. Just hold on a little longer and I'll find you.] The tall witch sent her thoughts out to her husband, willing him to feel her love and to stay alive. She smiled at Luke and said softly, "Patience, Luke. You'll see soon enough. Now, I need to talk to my son."

Closing her eyes, Demon linked to Marcus, telling him that she was coming home. The wave of joy that hit her almost made her laugh aloud. She could visualize Marcus bouncing up and down on the sofa in Lily's rooms, squealing at the top of his voice that his Mummy was coming home, and that together they were going to find his Daddy.

John followed Demon into the map room, and watched while she was reunited with her son. The reunion between the two empaths was emotional, and both lost control and sent waves of joy and relief around the ship. Everyone on the bridge paused and turned to watch, as the mother and child hugged each other, both crying and laughing together. Feeling a tug on his pants, John looked down to see Dasha smiling up at him, and he bent to lift his son into his arms.

Dasha leaned into his father's neck and whispered, "Marco will be happy now. He cried a lot 'cos he missed his Mommy. When will Uncle Matt come home?" John wished he had an answer to that question.

A movement caught his eye and he saw Angel stoop to pick up Half-Ted from where he had fallen on the deck, abandoned by Marcus in his eagerness to fling himself into his mother's arms. John watched the younger woman carefully, as she clutched the battered teddy bear to her chest, holding it tightly against the leather jacket she was also carrying. John realized this was the item Angel had collected from Demon's quarters. This was what Angel associated with Matthew.

Then all his attention was taken by the other reunion going on in the map room. He smiled as he watched Lily wrap herself around Luke, entwining her body around his as she kissed him. John wondered whether Luke might suffocate before she let him up for air, and was half surprised that his red-headed temptress didn't push her other lover back onto the map table, and have her way with him there and then. John closed his eyes and linked to his lovers, exchanging thoughts without words, feelings and emotions, promises of intimacies to come, before pulling himself together and clearing his throat.

"OK, Demon, let's hear this plan of yours. What power are you going to use to find the Captain? I have to say..." he was about to express his conviction that Matthew couldn't possibly still be alive, when Demon interrupted.

"Don't say it, John. It's not true. Let me prove it to you."

The tall blonde rose to her feet, still holding her son's hand tightly. She smiled over at where Lily was still wrapped around Luke, saying, "If Lily will just put Luke down for a minute, I'd like her to stand holding Dasha's hand on one side, and yours on the other, John. Angel, will you put the jacket on the table, then stand between Dasha and Marcus? I'll complete the circle between John and Marcus."

When they had all moved into position, Demon asked for the map table to be activated and for the mountainous area of the planet below to be displayed. John explained quietly that the projection was not real time, as their sensors couldn't penetrate the magnetic field. The area displayed was a summation of all the records of the missions flown by the fighters. Demon nodded, and said, "It will have to suffice."

John looked around to table, from Lily next to him, onto his son between her and Angel, then at Marcus, standing between his Aunt and his mother. The two little

boys looked puzzled, not knowing what was expected of them. [Well, they're not the only ones.] John thought. Then his thoughts were interrupted by a voice in his head.

[/Link! Feel, touch, think, bond.]/

Demon was using her touch to link to his mind, at the same time as she linked to her sisters and her son. Through the connection to her sisters, and their touch with Dasha, she somehow wove the group into a single bond of minds. Each remained individual but each became part of the whole. The group could share a single thought or could communicate independently. John had never experienced a group sharing like it. Only his sharing with Luke and Lily came close, and this was wider, deeper, bringing six into one. He could feel his son's startled amazement, Marcus' sudden anxiety, Angel and Demon rushing to soothe the little boy's fears, and Lily's excitement at what they were doing.

John went to say, "This is incredible!" and was astonished when his words came from Angel's mouth. Lily laughed aloud, but somehow it didn't sound like her. It sounded more like Marcus' distinctive giggle.

The voice spoke again. *[/Focus. We can no longer merge, but we can focus. The three can no longer be one, but with double the numbers, double the minds, we can try to come close to the power of the one. First we must seek.]/*

An image came into John's head, something completely unfamiliar to him, yet a part of him knew what he needed to do. That part of him was Angel and Lily. The image resolved itself as the two women closed their eyes and started to mutter strange words. It was a spell! They were casting a seeker spell, using Matthew's jacket to help them focus on the person they wanted to find. For a moment, the spell made sense to John. It all made sense, and he could understand what they did and how they did it. Then, in a blink, it was lost, sliding out of his mind, slipping away from him. Gone.

The jacket lifted from the map table, and John felt himself using his telekinetic powers to move it. No, not his powers, Angel's powers, but for a moment they were his too. He could feel what she did, knew how she did it, and knew how he could do it, too. Then it was gone, lost in the melee of thoughts and feelings.

[/Close your eyes. See the map. See the territory. Focus.]/ The voice in his head was a chorus, no longer Demon's alone, but a blend of the minds and voices around him. John did as he was told, and the image of the map grew in his mind until it became the territory. The jacket shrunk until it was a point, moving across the mental landscape, swooping, diving, twisting from one valley to the

next, seeking its owner.

John felt as if a magnet was pulling at his mind, dragging him toward a goal, and that goal was Matthew. Suddenly, he felt all of Demon's certainty that Matthew was still alive. Like her, he knew that his Captain and friend had survived, and he was ashamed of his doubts.

As the draw on his mind became stronger, John saw the power that drove the group bond, and felt it run through him like an electric current. The power came from the love of the people in the merge. Demon's love for Matthew was like a beacon of light, guiding them to their goal. It was enhanced by Angel's different, but no less intense, love for her brother-in-law, and Marcus' love and need for his father. By comparison to those three, the love Lily and John felt for their friend, and what Dasha felt for his uncle, was softer; a warm glow, supporting and nurturing the driving force of the spell.

The image of the land in John's mind continued to grow, making him feel as if he was flying over the valleys below, following the image of the jacket, pursuing it through the twisted terrain. Finally, the jacket swooped into a cave in the side of a cliff, and John saw the men sitting there. Matthew was half supporting G'Tan, helping him sit upright, as the large Narn coughed blood into his hands. The jacket somehow surrounded Matthew, enveloping him, wrapping itself around him, becoming a symbol of everything the six on board the Excalibur felt for him.

John watched as Matthew's face changed. Just for a moment, a half smile flickered on his face, as if he had felt the presence of the people searching for him. Then the image blurred and was lost, as a voice screamed with elation.

"MATTHEW!"

*Demon broke the link abruptly and fell to her knees by the side of the map table, sweeping Marcus into her arms and hugging him tightly, all the while sending through her link to her son, *[/We found him, darling! We found him!]**

*Marcus clung tightly to her neck, sending back waves of happiness, and asking, *[/When will Daddy come home? Will it be soon?]**

[/As soon as I can get him. Help me hold onto him, Marcus. I can feel him with my mind now, but you can help me hold him there. I won't let Daddy out of my mind now, until I have him in my arms.]

Marcus hugged her again, and Demon felt his mind link with hers. Her attachment to Matthew was like a shining thread, linking her mind to his. It was fragile, and she knew that a moment's lapse of concentration could endanger the tenuous link, but she was determined that she would never let it go. Her son's mental support strengthened and brightened the link to her husband.

Demon became aware of a hand resting on her shoulder, and a voice sounding softly. She heard it with her ears and her mind, and realized that John had been trying to attract her attention for some time.

[/Demon, I'm sending Jackson down with a shuttle and every fighter we have, for air cover. If you want to get some clean clothes and things for Matthew, get them while we get organized, and Jackson will take them with her.]

Demon surged to her feet, still holding her son in her arms. "No! I have to go with them! They won't be able to find Matthew without me."

John started to shake his head, saying, "It's too dangerous. We've flown over the area Matthew and G'Tan are in, and come under fire from the rebels. That's why I'm sending the fighters. It's too risky for..."

Demon interrupted him before he could finish. "John, please. I have to go with them. You may know where Matthew and G'Tan were during our sharing, but by the time you get the shuttle and fighters down there, they may have moved. I'm holding the link with Matthew's mind. He won't be able to feel it, and it's very fragile, but I'm hanging on. If Matthew moves, I'll know it, and I'll be able to guide the shuttle to him. You have to let me go, John. You must!"

John looked at her doubtfully, while Marcus' voice sounded in Demon's head. *[/Please don't leave me again, Mummy. You only just got back!]* Her son clung tightly to her and she felt his tears damp against her neck.

Hugging him tightly, Demon sent back, *[/It won't be for long, darling, I promise. I have to go and get Daddy. He won't be able to find his way home if I don't.]*

Marcus continued to cry quietly, as John sighed and nodded, reluctantly. "I hate to admit it, but you're right. I've lost the connection already. If he moves, we'll never find him. OK, get whatever you think Matthew will need, then get yourself down to the landing bay. The shuttle leaves in ten minutes. Be there." He spun on his heel and marched back to the bridge, almost flinging himself into the Captain's chair, giving terse orders to the bridge crew to organize the rescue party.

Lily's voice sounded softly in Demon's head. [//Forgive him, Demon. He desperately wants to go himself, but he knows he can't. It makes him a little abrupt.//]

Demon smiled and turned to her red-headed sister, saying aloud, "I understand." She then looked at Luke and smiled. "I guess you'll be coming along, Luke? It looked as if G'Tan may need your help."

Luke groaned theatrically, then smiled and said, "The prospect of another shuttle trip almost has me willing to take one of my own shots. Almost. I'll see you in the landing bay." Luke and Lily left the map room, arm in arm.

Demon turned to Angel, who had picked up Matthew's leather jacket from the map table, and was clutching it closely, along with Half-Ted. Demon saw her sister's bright blue eyes were shining, but she knew that Angel's tears were tears of joy. Angel whispered, "Bring him home, Demon. I'll take care of Marcus, just bring Matthew home."

Reaching out with her free hand, Demon pulled Angel close, hugging her sister and her son together. She knew how much Angel loved Matthew, and how much her husband loved her sister in return. Demon knew how hard the last few days must have been on Angel. She had given up so much, and lost so much in recent months. The prospect of losing Matthew, too, must have been hell for her. A wave of guilt swept over Demon, as she realized that her own fears and anxiety for Matthew had prevented her considering how much Angel must be suffering.

Holding her sister and her son closely, Demon sent to them both, [//I'm so sorry. I've been terribly selfish. Can you both forgive me? Please?//]

Angel pulled back from her sister's embrace and smiled sadly, sending, [//There's nothing to forgive, just bring him back to us. Help us become a family again.//] Angel's sending was accompanied by a wave of love from Marcus.

[//I want Daddy. When will Daddy come home?//]

Demon hugged them both tightly for a moment, then passed her son into her sister's arms. "Soon, Marcus. He'll be home soon. Take care of each other while I'm away. I have to go, or the shuttle will leave without me!" With one last kiss for them both, she ran from the map room, still clinging to her tenuous mental link with her husband, quickly running through what things he would need after his rescue.

As she ran to the bullet car, Demon almost laughed at the triviality of her

mental list. [Toothbrush! He'll want a toothbrush and toothpaste. He won't want to come back on board until he's clean and tidy. He can clean up on the shuttle.] Matthew wasn't a vain man, but Demon knew that he would want to appear presentable when he returned to take back command of his ship.

Luke hung onto his safety harness, wishing the flight would hurry up and be over. Each trip down to the planet seemed to get worse and he really wasn't sure he was going to make it without throwing up this time. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, trying to quell the waves of nausea that swept over him.

A gut wrenching drop was followed by, "Sorry!" from Trace Miller, at the controls of the shuttle.

Luke opened his eyes to glare at the pilot's back, then glanced at Demon, sitting in the center seat between Trace and Lieutenant Jackson. The tall blonde was leaning forward, peering out of the viewscreen, apparently oblivious to the turbulence. Luke almost smiled, knowing that she was totally focused on her mental link with Matthew, and that she was probably unaware of the sickening motion of the shuttle.

Looking around to distract himself, the doctor could see that the Narn Marines who occupied the other seats seemed to be coping with the bumpy ride a damn sight better than he was. Although they had only returned from the search parties that morning, every one of G'Tan's Marines had insisted on accompanying the rescue team. The shuttle only had six seats available, and Luke had no idea how they had decided amongst themselves who should go on the rescue, and who should stay behind.

However the other Narns had arrived at their selection, No'Kar sat bolt upright in the seat opposite Luke, immediately behind Trace, her eyes fixed firmly on Demon's back. She had been told by G'Tan to guard the Captain's wife and she did not intend to stop doing so until her Sergeant told her to stand down.

Suddenly, Demon let out a low cry. "Hurry! Something's happening!"

Jackson looked around from the co-pilot's seat, asking the tall blonde, "What? How do you know?"

Demon moaned softly. "I can feel him! Matthew's anxiety level just shot up. Something bad must have happened. Oh god, Trace! Please, hurry!"

The pilot didn't wait for orders, but pushed the nose of the shuttle down, diving through the cloud layer. For a few moments, the turbulence became much worse, and Luke became convinced that he'd have broken ribs before he got out of the ship--if he survived the journey, that is. He heard Jackson giving orders to the fighters accompanying them, and her voice was barely comprehensible, as the shaking and bouncing distorted her words.

Varzat's response was equally distorted, but intelligible. The Drazi squadron leader was taking the fighters on ahead. Able to travel faster than the shuttle, they would get to the valley where the Captain and G'Tan had last been located more quickly.

Luke quelled his nausea again, watching the side of Demon's face carefully as she moaned softly. The cheek the doctor could see had lost all color, and the tall blonde's eyes were closed as she whispered, "They're moving. I can feel it. More to starboard, Trace. Over that way."

The shuttle broke through the clouds and Luke could see Demon was pointing to the side of a mountain. Trace threw the shuttle into a sudden swerve, to avoid colliding with the cliff, and Luke's stomach rose into his throat. Only willpower enabled him to keep the contents to himself, as he watched the cliff pass with meters of the shuttle. Jackson broke off in the middle of her revised directions to the fighters, took a deep breath when she saw how close to a collision they had come, then continued her instructions.

"Down. Take us down. Hurry. Over there." Demon's eyes were shut tightly, but she still pointed to starboard, and Trace forced the shuttle into another sharp turn, this time skirting a pillar of rock so closely that Luke felt a jolt and heard a scraping, grating noise, as the belly of the shuttle grazed the surface.

Varzat's voice sounded over the comm. unit. "Incoming fire from the surface. We're going in. Follow us down."

*Luke closed his eyes again, deciding that next time he *would* take the anti-nausea shot.*

Gideon supported G'Tan as they slid down the steep slope, trying to keep under cover of the trees. They had been forced out of their cave an hour earlier. Although it was still daylight, the appearance of a mixed force of Drakh and Inesbitrins below them had made it obvious they were in imminent danger of discovery.

They had managed to sneak out of the cave without being seen, but the thin layer of snow that had fallen during the day had been enough to show their tracks, despite Gideon's efforts to conceal them. The enemy had picked up their trail a few moments before, and was now pursuing them. From the sound of the voices behind them, Gideon knew they had only a few minutes lead.

G'Tan gasped, "Leave me! Alone, you still have a chance. Together, we have none." The large Narn could hardly breathe now, and Gideon was supporting most of his weight as they slithered down the rocky slope, accumulating more bruises and abrasions as they half slid, half fell.

"Forget it." Gideon growled back, saving his breath for more important things, like staying alive. He knew G'Tan was right. He knew that his life expectancy could now be counted in minutes, but he couldn't leave the Narn behind. He never left anyone behind. He'd finally reached that decision as he'd sat in the cave that day. The price he would pay for such a betrayal would be too high.

The sound of the pursuers grew closer, and Gideon knew they had to make a stand. If they kept moving, they would be shot down as they ran, easy targets for the enemies' guns. He paused long enough to get his bearings, then began to steer the Narn toward a large boulder that projected out from the side of the cliff. It didn't provide much cover, but at least it gave them shelter on two sides. There weren't a lot of choices left at that point.

A loud whine, and the simultaneous splintering of a nearby tree, warned them that they were out of time. Gideon pushed G'Tan into the shelter of the boulder, then drew his PPG, trying to get as much of his body under cover as he could. He knew his whole right side was exposed, and he didn't expect to live long. He just hoped it would be over quickly.

G'Tan pulled himself more upright, coughing persistently now, blood trickling down his chin, as he raised his PPG rifle and rested it on top of the boulder. A quick glance showed the Captain that the Narn Marine was grinning broadly, despite the pain he obviously suffered.

G'Tan whispered, "Let's take as many of them with us as we can," and fired. Gideon's head snapped around, and he saw one of the Drakh lifted off its feet and thrown backwards, just as it emerged from the surrounding trees.

The Captain trained his PPG on the Inesbitrin following hard on the heels of the Drakh, and neatly blew his head off. Shots whined around his head, but by some small miracle, none of them were getting close. The enemy was firing wildly, unwilling to expose themselves to the deadly accuracy of Gideon's and

G'Tan's guns.

The next few moments were frantic, with the Captain and his Marine Sergeant taking out every target that emerged from the trees. Gideon could count fifteen bodies strewn up the hill. Two were crawling back into the shelter of the trees and Gideon let them alone. He didn't have shots to spare. Quickly replacing the energy cap in his PPG, he calculated he had another ten shots left, then he would be weaponless. A quick glance at the power cells of G'Tan's rifle showed that the Narn was no better off.

Gideon knew his life would be over in minutes. He decided that he'd save his last shot for himself, as he didn't want to be taken alive. He had no idea what the Drakh would do to him if they took him, but he was sure that death would be far preferable. He just wished he had been able to see his wife one last time, to say goodbye to her and to his son. A wave of loss, regret and sadness swept over Gideon, as he thought about how much he had to lose, and he cursed the fates that had decided to take him just when he and Deborah had planned a new life together. Three more shots in quick succession took out two more Drakh, and he ducked quickly, feeling the heat of a near miss scorch his cheek. The enemy was getting closer and so were their shots.

G'Tan fired slowly but steadily, and Gideon counted down the shots the Narn had left. He fired twice more himself, taking out another Inesbitrin rebel, absently noting that he still couldn't tell whether it was male or female, but hardly caring.

Three more shots from his PPG, and Gideon knew he was nearly out. G'Tan's rifle expired at the same moment. The Narn looked at the Captain, then down at the PPG, whispering, "How many?"

Gideon grimaced and whispered back, "Two. One for each of us."

The Narn Marine nodded and closed his eyes, saying, "Do it. Now." Gideon raised the PPG to G'Tan's temple and tightened his finger on the trigger.

"Oh god! Please hurry!" Demon's voice was frantic as she urged the shuttle forward. They were so close! She could feel Matthew's emotions directly, no longer needing her mental link to trace him. She felt the wave of despair as he felt it, sensed his sorrow and regret, and knew what he was preparing to do.

The tall blonde closed her eyes and put everything she had into a surge of love and fear. She knew she didn't have the ability to send a thought to Matthew,

but could only hope and pray that her projection might reach him.

With every fiber of her being, Demon projected a single word.

"WAIT!"

Gideon lifted his finger from the trigger, and gave G'Tan a puzzled look. He ducked as another shot came too close for comfort. "Did you feel that?" He asked, not sure if he could believe what his own senses were telling him.

G'Tan nodded, sliding further down behind the boulder. "I felt something, but what..."

The Narn trailed off, as a fighter roared overhead, firing on the enemy grouped uphill from their shelter. The explosion threw several bodies into the air, and the Drakh turned their fire into the sky, trying to take out the squadron now cutting back and forth across the valley.

Gideon grinned. "Looks like the cavalry has arrived. Let's get ourselves out of here. If there are fighters overhead, I bet there's a shuttle close behind, and we need to get to somewhere it can land."

While the dive-bombing fighters distracted the enemy, Gideon dragged G'Tan out of the shelter of the boulder. No shots came in their direction, although a full-scale firefight was in progress further up the hill. Again, the Captain and the Narn half-slipped and half-fell down the hill, bumping into trees and rocks in their haste to get away.

As Gideon held up G'Tan, he wondered where Deborah was. Surely she couldn't send her feelings all the way from the Excalibur. Yet the sensation he'd just received was unmistakably one of his wife's projections. He pushed the puzzle aside to tackle later. Right now, he had to focus on staying alive.

The trees thinned as they progressed downhill, and Gideon saw a small brook trickling along the bottom of the valley, a thin stream of water showing between floes of ice. The water cut through flattish rocks, and as far as the Captain could tell, there was just enough room for a shuttle to set down, if it straddled the stream, and if the pilot was very good indeed.

The fighters continued to roar overhead, flying back and forth, pounding fire into the enemy grouped up the hill. The returning fire from the ground grew

intermittent, as more and more of the enemy troops were killed. Finally the guns fell silent. The fighters took one last sweep along the valley, and when no weapons were fired at them, they disappeared over the ridge into the next valley, leaving an eerie silence behind.

Gideon lowered G'Tan to the ground, helping him lean against a rock, then stood scanning the sky. As he expected, the fighters came back around, running down the length of the valley. The leader wagged his wings in salute, as he spotted the Captain and the Narn on the valley floor, then he led his squadron on another sweep, making sure that all the enemy were cleared out.

A rumble from behind him made Gideon turn, to see the shuttle coming around the side of the mountain toward him. He waved frantically, signaling their position, then looked down at G'Tan, grinning. "They found us. Now we just have to hope that Trace is piloting that shuttle. I don't think anyone else is going to be able to get it down."

G'Tan coughed quietly, saying, "They would only send the best to rescue the Captain." His eyes closed, and Gideon's elation vanished, as he saw a spurt of blood emerge from the Narn's mouth. He knelt quickly and helped G'Tan sit more upright, hardly aware of the shuttle settling carefully behind him.

"OK, take it easy. We're nearly home and dry. Don't you go dying on me now, Sergeant. That's an order!"

The Narn opened his eyes and smiled weakly. "That could be a little difficult, Captain. Can't you give me an easier order?" His voice was barely a whisper, and Gideon knew that all his efforts had been in vain. G'Tan was going to die.

"Don't you dare die on me, you old bastard! You are not going to leave me with the child support on eleven pouchlings!" Gideon shouted at the dying Narn, trying to stem the flow of blood with the remnants of his torn scarf.

A hand touching his shoulder distracted Gideon's attention from the Narn dying before his eyes. He looked up quickly, into Luke Raven's warm brown eyes.

"Let me see if I can help him follow that order, Captain."

Gideon heaved a sigh of relief and stood quickly, stepping aside and letting the doctor get close to G'Tan. "Glad to see you, Doc. Do whatever it takes. Make sure he lives."

Raven nodded as he knelt by the Narn Marine's side, already using his scanner

to ascertain the extent of G'Tan's injuries, totally focused on his job.

Gideon wobbled on his feet, as a wave of exhaustion and dizziness swept over him. He would have fallen, had not a hand supported his arm, holding him up. He turned to see Jackson standing at his side, and realized he'd been so focused on G'Tan that he hadn't heard her arrive, nor had he noticed the Marines fanning out to establish a perimeter around their position.

Jackson smiled and steadied him, then supported him as they moved toward another boulder, saying, "I think you'd better sit down before you fall down, Captain."

The Captain lowered himself gratefully onto the rock, feeling as if his legs had turned to Jell-O. Looking up at his second officer, he suddenly became aware of how dirty and disheveled he must look. Jackson's thermal gear looked crisp and clean. Gideon's was falling to pieces. He knew his hair must be a greasy mess under the woolen cap that he hadn't removed in eleven days. His face was smeared with mud, where he had deliberately darkened it to provide camouflage at night.

Gideon didn't even want to think about what his breath must smell like, after eleven days without cleaning his teeth, but decided that any odor was probably masked by the smell from his body and clothes. Even his hands were filthy in the places where his gloves had torn, while scrambling among rocks from one valley to the next. He and G'Tan had come across little free flowing water in their travels, and rubbing down with snow to keep clean hadn't held that much appeal.

Gideon resigned himself to having to give orders to fumigate the shuttle after he and G'Tan were taken back to the Excalibur, then pushed aside those concerns. His crew would just have to take him as they found him. Dirty. And on the subject of finding...

"You took your time, didn't you? How come it took you so long to find us?" The Captain gave his second officer a wry grin. "I know you had no instruments working, and that we were traveling at night, camouflaged, and doing our best to stay hidden, but that's no excuse. What took you so long?"

Jackson laughed. "You did a damned good job of staying hidden, so we needed a little help. In fact, I'm surprised that our helper isn't..." She trailed off as she turned to look back at the shuttle, and Gideon followed her gaze.

To his complete astonishment, he saw his wife hurtling toward him, running

flat out, with a Narn Marine at her shoulder. Deborah's face streamed tears as she ran, and her long blonde hair flowed out behind her. Gideon just had time to stand up when she threw herself at him, enveloping him in a bear hug, and a wave of love. Neither of them spoke as they held each other tightly. He buried his head in her soft hair, inhaling deeply, savoring the unique scent of her, and holding onto her as if his life depended on it.

After a few moments spent motionless, Gideon realized that his legs were giving way again, and he pushed back a little, to look at his wife, and smiled. "Let me sit down again, and you can tell me what in hell you're doing here."

When Luke and Jackson had run from the shuttle, No'Kar had held Demon back.

"Not yet. Not until we've secured the perimeter."

Demon had struggled for a second, but soon realized that it was useless. She wasn't going anywhere until the Narn Marine let her. She'd managed to persuade No'Kar to allow her move to the door of the shuttle, and had stood at the top of the ramp, watching, as Luke and Jackson reached Matthew and G'Tan.

The tall blonde had started to cry silently, as she saw the state her husband and the Narn Marine Sergeant were in. They were both filthy, clothes torn, and sporting numerous scratches and bruises. The days they'd been lost had obviously been hard on them, and a wave of guilt had swept over Demon, as she'd reminded herself that she could have found them much sooner. [Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!] She'd condemned herself, again struggling against the Narn Marine's hold, desperate to get to her husband.

She'd watched as Jackson helped him to sit on a boulder, and had strained her ears to hear what was said between them, but the distance was too great. Then Demon had heard No'Kar's voice in her ear. "All secure, you can go now."

Demon had never run faster in her life, hardly aware that No'Kar stayed right at her shoulder, ready to defend her still. When she finally reached Matthew's side, she helped him to sit on the rock again, overcome by so many conflicting emotions that she didn't know how to react. She dropped to her knees, and knelt at his feet, looking up at him. He was dirty, his face covered in mud, but the lines of exhaustion showed through clearly. His eyes looked tired and sad, and the scratches and bruises on his cheeks weren't entirely concealed by the beard

he'd grown during his time away from her. Demon wanted to hold him tightly, but all the while her mind was jubilant. [I told them! He's alive, oh god, he's alive and I found him and I'll never let him go again!]

Her feelings robbed her of speech, and all she could do was reach out and run her hand gently down his cheek, trying to wipe away some of the dirt. After a moment, she dug into a pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. First, she wiped away her own tears, then she used the damp cloth to dab at Matthew's face, gently cleaning away the grime from his cheeks, where she could see them above his beard.

All the time, Matthew just sat watching her, waiting for an answer to his question, but Demon found she still couldn't speak. She just wanted to look at him, rejoicing in his being there in front of her, alive. After a few moments, Matthew reached out and took her hands, holding them tightly. Then he looked up at Jackson, who had stood watching them both, smiling quietly.

"As my wife seems to have been struck dumb for the first time in her life, perhaps you can explain why you brought her down here, Lieutenant? Bringing a civilian into hostile territory isn't usual Earthforce procedure."

Demon clutched Matthew's hands, staring up into his face, still unable to talk or move, as Jackson described how the sisters had linked with their children and John to find the Captain. "Mrs. Gideon had to come with us, Sir, to guide us in. We'd never have found you without her."

Matthew nodded and turned his attention back to his wife, who still knelt, speechless, at his feet. He smiled sadly at her, a smile that nearly broke Demon's heart, and raised his hand to stroke her face, saying softly, "I knew you'd be handy to have around one day. Thank you." Demon leaned into his touch, closing her eyes as she felt him run his thumb along her cheekbone. She had feared she would never feel his touch again, and the sensation started the tears rolling down her cheeks once more. They stayed unmoving for a while, until Luke's voice called their attention back to where he'd been working on G'Tan.

"OK, I've got him stabilized for the moment, but I don't want to move him any more than I have to. His internal injuries are severe; I have no idea how he's kept going this long. If we try to take him back to the ship now, the turbulence could finish him off."

Demon looked across at G'Tan as he lay on the rocks, completely still. His face was pale, and the dark spots on his skin looked almost gray. She looked up at her husband again as he said, "We can't stay here. For a start, there's no shelter,

and more of those Drakh could turn up at any time."

A sharp intake of breath from Christina Jackson attracted Demon's attention to the dark Lieutenant. "Drakh? Where the hell did they come from? We thought it was just the rebels we were chasing off."

Matthew shook his head, still holding Demon's hands tightly as he sat. "No, the rebels have been getting supplies from the Drakh for years. We need to get back to the Excalibur as soon as we can. There's no telling when a Drakh supply ship might turn up."

Raven shook his head. "If we try to take G'Tan back up now, we'll kill him, and you're in no state to withstand that turbulence either, Captain."

The doctor stood and moved over to the rock where Matthew sat, running his medical scanner over the Captain, before saying, "You're exhausted, dehydrated, and borderline hypothermic, Captain. And you have your own set of cuts and bruises we need to treat, before any infections set in. You need liquid, rest and food--in that order--before you're fit for duty. I'm signing you off duty for the next twenty-four hours and that's a medical order."

Matthew closed his mouth, having opened it to protest, but stopped by Raven's final words. Demon watched, her heart nearly bursting with love, as her husband cocked his head to one side. He gave the doctor a wry smile. "You get way too much enjoyment out of giving me orders, Doc. OK, what do you suggest? We can't stay here, and you won't let me give orders, but I need to get up to the ship, to tell John to prepare for a possible fight. Suggestions?"

Luke pondered for a moment then grinned. "You're going to love this. I know how much you enjoyed the priestesses' hospitality," Gideon groaned, but Luke ignored him and continued, "so we'll take you and G'Tan back to their castle. If Trace flies slow and low enough, we shouldn't get thrown around too much. Demon and I can stay there with you and G'Tan overnight, while Jackson takes the shuttle back up to the ship and warns John. Will that work?"

Matthew grinned. "You really will do anything to avoid taking that anti-nausea shot, won't you, Doc?" He fell silent for a moment, considering the recommendation, then nodded. "It's a plan. Let's move." Matthew went to stand and fell back, as he found his legs wouldn't support him. Demon leaped to her feet and helped her husband pull himself up, then put her arm around his waist, helping him stand, half carrying his weight. They stood quietly for a moment, while Luke organized a stretcher to move G'Tan, then Matthew looked around at Demon and smiled.

"I've never known you so quiet for so long. Did the cat get your tongue while I was away?"

Demon managed a wobbly smile, before whispering, "I've missed you, but I don't like this." She reached up and ran her hand along his beard.

Matthew laughed softly, then turned her slightly, so he could kiss her forehead. "I've missed you, too. And you'll get a proper kiss once I've gotten rid of the beard and cleaned my teeth."

Demon felt the tears rolling down her face again as she looked up at him and said, "Your toothbrush and shaver are in the shuttle." Then she lost control completely, laid her head on his shoulder, and wept.

Gideon sat watching, as Raven continued to monitor G'Tan's condition during the flight. They had got the Narn into the shuttle without too much trouble, and the Marines had jury rigged a 'cradle', which held G'Tan's stretcher in place. Ka'Van had given up her seat to the Captain, insisting on kneeling on the floor of the shuttle, next to her Sergeant's stretcher. Trace was flying low and steady, with the complete wing of fighters keeping pace, providing cover.

Deborah had helped Gideon up the ramp into the shuttle, and settled him into a seat, fastening his safety harness carefully. He'd tried to tell her that he wasn't fragile, he wouldn't break, but the look she had given him had silenced him quickly. It was obvious that Deborah had been badly frightened by the events of the last few days, and she did not intend to allow any further accidents to happen to her husband. Gideon smiled to himself, looking forward to being cosseted and pampered for the foreseeable future.

His wife had sat next to him, and as Raven and the Narn Marines had got G'Tan secured, she had pulled a bag out from under her seat. After the shuttle lifted off, Deborah had pulled a flask out from the bag, and poured hot soup into a cup, which she now offered silently to Gideon. The smell alone set the Captain drooling, and his first sip was bliss, the flavor washing over his taste buds, and the heat invading his whole body as he swallowed. He closed his eyes, wallowing in the sheer pleasure of feeling warm and safe. When he opened them again, he looked at his wife and smiled.

"Thank you. How's Marcus?"

Deborah closed her eyes for a moment, the soft smile that Gideon associated with

her linking to her son or her sisters spreading across her face. When she opened her eyes, they were shining with tears, as she whispered, "He's very, very happy that I've found his Daddy, and as mad as hell that we aren't going straight back to him. I've explained that we'll be back tomorrow and you need to rest, but he's sulking. I think I'm going to get the silent treatment when we get back to the Excalibur."

Deborah tried to smile, but the tears overflowed from her eyes again, and Gideon knew that her son's attitude had upset her. He reached out and put his arm around her shoulders, her seatbelt preventing him from pulling her close. By pulling her head toward him and leaning his own head in her direction, he could just reach to kiss her cheek, whispering, "We'll make it up to him." He stroked his thumb along her cheekbone again, then laughed softly. "Now I've made your face dirty. You'd better dig that handkerchief out and use it on yourself."

His wife sniffed, then smiled as she reached into her pocket for the handkerchief and cleaned her face, then passed it to Gideon for him to wipe his hands when he'd finished his soup. Passing the cup back for a refill, the Captain glanced out of the front view screen, and saw that they were emerging from the mountains out into the rolling plains. In half an hour or so, they would arrive at the priestesses' castle. Time to get back to work.

When he'd emptied the cup of soup once more, he sighed and called out to Jackson, who sat in the co-pilot's seat, "OK, brief me. What have you been up to these past eleven days, and what do I need to know?"

He listened intently as Jackson briefed him on the progress of the negotiations with the priestesses, the success of the mission there, and the organization of the evacuation fleet. When Jackson had finished, they were descending smoothly to the flat area in front of the castle. Gideon nodded his thanks and turned to his wife. "I want to hear more about what was in that inner sanctum of theirs that upset you so much, but it can wait. Let's go see just how much these priestesses have changed while I've been away."

Latharr emerged from the castle as Gideon walked slowly down the shuttle ramp, his arm around his wife, still leaning on her for support, but not quite as heavily as he had on the way up. The hot soup had helped considerably, but the Captain knew that it would take several more hot meals and a lot of sleep in a warm bed before he was fully fit again. He was also eager to get to the privacy of a room where his wife could use a regenerator on the numerous scrapes and

bruises covering his body.

The brief respite of the journey in the shuttle had stiffened Gideon's limbs, and made the cold wind even harder to bear, as he made his way painfully down the ramp. Deborah had wrapped her scarf around his neck, but it didn't help a great deal against the biting wind, which seemed able to find every tiny tear and rip in his uniform, penetrating icy cold fingers into his bones. Then No'Kar moved to stand behind them, acting as a windbreak in the process, much to Gideon's relief. He was determined not to shiver, wanting no more comments about 'quaking in fear' from the Priestess. To his surprise, Latharr nodded politely, and her voice appeared to hold genuine pleasure as she greeted him.

"We are pleased to welcome you back to our home, Captain Matthew Gideon." The Captain wondered why she had used his full name in that way but decided to ask Deborah about it later. The Priestess continued, "We have been most concerned about your wife in your absence. We hope your safe return will improve her health and her spirits."

Gideon laughed to himself. He might have known. They didn't give a damn about his welfare; they were just worried about Deborah. [Oh well, I shouldn't complain. At least she's being polite, which is more than she was last time.] He managed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, as he thanked Latharr for her concern and good wishes.

The Priestess went on, "We have kept Mrs. Deborah Gideon's rooms ready for her. We had hoped that she would return to us. Please, let us know if there is anything further we can do to provide for your comfort and convenience."

Gideon was almost speechless at the change of attitude, and he was grateful when Deborah responded on their behalf, her voice deep and soft. "Thank you, Latharr. My husband is tired and hungry, and needs medical attention. I will take him to my rooms now, to take care of him. Can you provide shelter and warmth for Doctor Raven and his patient overnight? It would not be advisable for them to return to our ship at this time."

Deborah waved at where the Narn Marines were now carrying G'Tan's stretcher from the shuttle, with Raven in close attendance. Latharr nodded and gestured for them to follow her into the castle, leaving Gideon and Deborah standing by the shuttle as Jackson joined them, with No'Kar standing a few steps from Deborah's shoulder, as always.

Gideon turned to his second officer. "Tell Commander Matheson to go to full battle alert. Once the fighters are refueled, get them out on patrol, and get a

message to the ISA. Tell them we need as many White Stars as they can release. If the Drakh on this planet have managed to get a message out, we could have a whole fleet on its way here. Even if the enemy doesn't arrive before we move the Excalibur, we'll need to post White Stars here, until we can evacuate the local population. Then they'll be needed to guard the mining fleet. Get all that to Sheridan's office at once. Advise them that I'll prepare a full briefing when I get back to the ship, as soon as the doctor agrees I'm fit for duty." He gave a shark like grin, and continued, "Bring the shuttle back down mid-morning. If I haven't been signed off by then, I'll be looking for a new CMO."

Jackson saluted crisply and ran back up the ramp. Gideon leaned on Deborah as they walked slowly up the hill to the castle, followed by No'Kar. They turned at the top, to watch the shuttle lift off, then stood watching it in silence for a few moments. As the lights of its engines disappeared into the evening twilight, the Captain turned to his wife and smiled. "I think I can just about make it to that bathroom. I hope to God they have the water heated."

Deborah smiled and whispered, "I'll go kill some priestesses if they haven't," and led him to her rooms.

Gideon stood under the gushing hot water, his head bowed, his feet apart, and his arms braced against the walls of the shower. He was sure if he tried to stand up unsupported, his knees would give way, and he'd end up in a heap on the floor.

Deborah had stripped his filthy clothes from him when they'd arrived at her rooms, throwing them into a corner. Gideon hoped she had some clean clothes for him in the bag she'd carried from the shuttle, as he didn't relish the idea of appearing back on the Excalibur wrapped in the sleeping furs that covered the bed. Then he decided he was too damned tired to care. He just wanted to be clean and to sleep, and if he could do both at the same time, all the better.

His wife had led him through to the bathroom, pushed him gently under the shower, then turned the water on full. The power and heat of the water had nearly forced Gideon to his knees, but by bracing his arms on the wall, he'd managed to stay upright. Deborah had moved to run more hot water into the tub, telling him that he could soak after he'd showered off the worst of the dirt.

A cool breeze on his back made Gideon aware that Deborah had opened the shower door. He opened his eyes, just as her hand appeared in front of him, holding his toothbrush, with a stripe of toothpaste along it. The Captain

laughed and pushed himself away from the wall. He took the toothbrush from his wife's hand, and turned, to find her standing behind him, naked.

He allowed his eyes to run the length of her body, watching the hot water wet her hair, darkening the golden strands as it fell down her back. Rivulets of water fell between her breasts, parting either side of her hard nipples, then cascading down her flat belly, into the nest of curls at the top of her thighs. The water flowed down her long legs, as she stood with them slightly parted. Gideon moaned softly. He had dreamed of her standing before him like this, on each of the last eleven nights. He had missed the sight of her, the smell of her, the sound of her voice, and the feel of her soft skin under his fingers. There had been times when he'd thought that he might never enjoy her nearness again. It hardly seemed possible that she could be standing before him now, in all her naked glory.

Gideon whispered, "God, I've missed you so much," just as his knees started to give way under him.

Deborah stepped forward quickly, putting one arm around him, holding him up, as she pushed his hand toward his mouth. "Hurry up and clean your teeth. I want that kiss, even if I have to put up with the beard for now."

Gideon laughed and lifted the toothbrush to his mouth, starting to brush slowly, as Deborah gently moved him to lean against the wall, then reached for a bottle of shampoo. He turned to face the wall again, bracing himself with one hand, while he used the other to clean his teeth. Then he felt Deborah's hands touching his head, massaging the shampoo into his scalp. Her touch was firm and sensual, moving back and forth, making sure that his hair was completely clean. Then her hands moved down his back, gently cleaning away the grime with a soft sponge, careful not to rub too hard on the bruises and abrasions he still sported. Gideon groaned softly again. It felt so damned good. He was warm, he was getting clean, and Deborah stood naked behind him, washing him, touching him, waiting for him to take her in his arms and kiss her.

Gideon waited, while his wife moved further down, gently soaping his buttocks, then moving down his legs. When she arrived at his ankles, he lifted one foot at a time, letting her wash under his feet and between his toes, relishing her firm yet gentle touch. His feet had been sore and tired after so many days walking, but when Deborah finished massaging them, they felt refreshed.

Deciding that his teeth were clean enough, Gideon pushed himself away from the wall again, and dropped the toothbrush to the floor. He turned and pulled

Deborah toward him, taking her lips in a long, passionate kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, touching hers as she responded with equal longing and passion. Gideon pulled her closer, wanting to feel the length of her body against his, all the while reveling in the feel of the hot water cascading over them both.

As he pulled her tightly against him, an entirely unexpected reaction set in. Gideon would have sworn he was too tired to become aroused, but it seemed that a certain part of his anatomy was less weary than the rest. Feeling the surge of blood into his cock, he moved his hips, rubbing his incipient erection against Deborah's belly. Gideon felt her lips move under his, and he knew she was smiling. He released her mouth, pulling his head back a fraction, and whispering, "The rest of me is as dead as a dodo, but there's one part that's been distinctly lacking in exercise these past few days. It seems Kaa's looking for action, but frankly, I'm not sure if the rest of me is up to it."

Deborah leaned back a little and smiled up into his eyes. "I'll take care of it, if you like. You won't have to do a thing." She started to slide down his body, and Gideon knew what she intended. He pushed his arms under hers, and pulled her back to her feet, barely having the strength to stop her.

"Not that way. You said you didn't want to waste a drop. If you don't mind going on top again, and doing all the work, we could move into the tub..." He trailed off as Deborah moved her hand to his lips, interrupting his words.

"Don't worry about that. Captain One Shot did his duty and Ice Queen Myrtle was fertile."

Gideon took a moment to digest her words, then his eyes widened, and he pushed his wife out to arms length. "You mean..." He paused, looking down at her belly, then moving his hand to cover it, gently.

When he looked up again, Deborah was smiling and nodding. "She's barely a tadpole as yet, but your daughter is growing by the hour."

The Captain could hardly believe what he had heard. [My daughter? We're going to have a little girl!] He knew he was grinning like an idiot but couldn't stop. He moved his hand gently over Deborah's belly, knowing it was stupid to expect to feel any swelling so early, but wanting that contact with her and his daughter.

[My daughter! Our daughter. Our baby.] He pulled Deborah back into his arms and kissed her passionately, trying to communicate in that kiss just how happy she had made him. Gideon knew that she would be able to sense his feelings, and

he was once again grateful that he was married to an empath. She would know what he felt, without him ever having to find the words.

When he finally released Deborah's mouth, Gideon looked at her and was startled to see tears in her eyes again. At first he thought it was water from the shower, which still cascaded around and over them, but then he saw the look of anguish in her eyes. "What? What's the matter?" he asked, stroking her cheek with his thumb.

Deborah sniffed and leaned her head on his shoulder, whispering, "I was so scared. They kept telling me you were dead, but I knew they were wrong. I knew you wouldn't leave me, but I was frightened that we might not find you in time. I was scared that I'd have to have her alone. So scared. I didn't know how I'd live without you, but I knew I had to try, for Marcus, for our daughter, but I was so afraid, and I didn't know how I was going to go on..." Her words disintegrated into hiccups, and Gideon pulled her back into her arms, rocking her gently, telling her that he'd never leave her again.

Demon pulled herself together quickly, and smiled up into her husband's eyes. "I'm going to stop sniveling now. I don't know what I'm complaining about, anyway. You've had a much worse time than I have, and you haven't said a word about it. Here, let me..."

Before she could say anything more, she found her words stopped by Matthew's mouth over hers. His kiss said everything he hadn't, and she felt his love wash over her like a wave. He held her tightly against him, letting her feel his arousal. Demon closed her eyes and surrendered to the sensations flowing through her. The roughness of Matthew's beard against her face felt odd, but it didn't matter. The pleasure he gave her with his mouth, and the feel of his hands wandering over her body, stroking and caressing her, far outweighed the strangeness of his kiss.

After a few moments, Matthew pulled back and looked at her sadly, saying, "The worst part was thinking I might never see you and Marcus again. And you weren't the only one who was scared at the idea of you being pregnant and left to have our baby alone. That was part of what kept me going, what made me refuse to give up. I had to get back to you, and our children."

Demon felt Matthew's hand move again, touching her belly gently, stroking softly. She leaned forward to kiss him gently, moving her own hand to fondle his erection. Then she smiled wickedly. "Why don't we move to the tub? I can wash

the rest of you, get rid of that beard, and then we can take care of this..." she paused, searching for an appropriate word, "outstanding issue."

Matthew laughed and put his arm around her shoulder, leaning on her as they left the shower, heading for the tub.

10th July 2273

Gideon stood in the central chamber of the priestesses' castle, thinking about how much had happened and how things had changed since his first entrance into this room. He now held his wife firmly at his side, with no concern about physical displays of affection. He knew that he couldn't spend the rest of his life holding Deborah tightly, but he intended to do it as often as he could. He did not propose ever again to be separated from her or their children, for any longer than absolutely necessary. [Children. That's a word I'm going to have to get used to. 'Our children'.]

The news that Deborah was pregnant had made Gideon happier than he'd ever have thought possible. This was going to be completely different from having Marcus. Then he had only spent a few days with her during her pregnancy. This time, he planned to spend every moment at Deborah's side, watching her grow, being there for her in every way.

They had lain in bed together that morning, after a slow, lazy lovemaking in the early light of dawn, discussing names for their daughter. This time, Gideon wouldn't leave Deborah to choose a name for their child alone. They had quickly decided to call their baby after Gideon's mother. He had asked his wife about her mother's name, and she'd shrugged, saying she didn't remember. The Captain wasn't sure he believed that, but Deborah rarely lied outright, so he'd left it. Their daughter was going to be called Martha. [Mattie, for her grandmother and for me. My baby Mattie.] Gideon could hardly wait for the next nine months to pass, so he could hold his daughter in his arms. [She's going to be a beauty, like her mother.]

That thought made him turn his head to look at his wife, standing by his side. She was dressed in her usual black, with her black furry hat pulled down over her ears, covering her hair completely. The hall was no warmer than when they had first visited it, and Gideon could see Deborah's breath in the air. The tip of her nose was pink from the cold, and the Captain had an almost irresistible desire to lean across and kiss it.

Deborah had told him all about her time with the priestesses as they had lain in bed together, holding each other, reveling in the physical contact with each other. Gideon had been startled to hear about the thing inside the priestesses' inner sanctum, but in the light of his experiences with the rebels, he'd since decided that perhaps it wasn't so surprising after all. It was something Gideon wanted to think more about, and to discuss with President Sheridan when he was debriefed on the mission. In the meantime, the Captain's main concern was to keep his wife far away from the temple. The last thing Deborah needed was a painful reminder of what she carried inside her. Gideon couldn't help smiling to himself as he thought about the other little passenger his wife now carried. A far more welcome passenger. He felt a sudden surge of love for his wife, and she obviously felt it, as she turned and smiled at him.

"Are you warm enough? You could take my scarf if you're..." Gideon stopped Deborah's words with a quick kiss.

"I'm fine. Last night you warmed me up again, and the clothes are keeping me warm. Hold onto your scarf. You need it in here." Deborah had brought him clean clothes down from the Excalibur, with everything from thermal underwear, thick socks, and a heavy sweater, through to a new wooly hat and gloves. As a result, Gideon felt warmer than he had in days, despite the cold temperature in the hall.

The only part of him that was a little cool was his face. He lifted his hand and rubbed gently along the line of his jaw, feeling the smooth skin there. He hadn't much liked the feel of the beard he'd grown, but it had been warm, at least. Thinking of the beard led to memories of Deborah shaving him the night before, and Gideon smiled again. [That was fun.] Even in his completely exhausted state, their lovemaking in the tub had been memorable. The warm rooms, hot water and hotter wife has eased his pains, soothed his mind, and made him feel better than he had for a long while.

Gideon knew that he still had a way to go before he recovered completely, but he was on the mend, and he hoped that Luke would sign him off as fit for duty later. Just as his thoughts turned to the doctor, Luke appeared, as if summoned.

"How's G'Tan? Is he going to be OK?" Gideon's words were out before Luke had got fully through the door.

Luke smiled and nodded. "He's got a way to go, and we're going to have to do some surgery on the part of him he uses instead of a liver, but he's going to be fine. They're as tough as old boots, these Narn Marines. Damned difficult to kill.

He'll need a few weeks convalescence before he's fit for duty, but he's ready for the transfer back to the Excalibur. Now let's have a look at you."

Gideon held still while Luke ran his medical scanner over him, then waited while the doctor examined his findings. After a few moments of silence, the Captain narrowed his eyes and glared at his CMO. "Dammit, Luke, don't be so theatrical about it. I'm fit, aren't I?"

Luke looked up from his instrument and grinned. "I have to get a little revenge for all that Narn Opera." Gideon groaned, remembering the trick he'd played on Luke a few months before. The doctor went on, "OK, you still have some toxins left in your blood from too much adrenaline and stress, and it's obvious you're still tired, but other than that, you're fine. Looks like Demon did a good job on fixing whatever ailed you." This time, Luke's grin was wicked as he looked from the Captain to his wife and back.

Gideon laughed, tightening his arm around Deborah's waist. "Damn right, she did. She always does." He turned his head and kissed his wife on the cheek, feeling the warmth of the blush that showed there.

Deborah chuckled, saying, "Watch it, Luke Raven. Payback from me would be far worse than a few hours of Narn Opera."

Luke pushed his medical scanner back into his jacket pocket, laughing as he said, "You sisters are as bad as each other. Lily has a way with that dagger of hers..." He trailed off with a wink, leaving Lily's punishments to his audience's imagination. Assuming a more official demeanor, the doctor continued, "I'm formally pronouncing you fit for duty, Captain. Now, I'd better get back to my other patient, before No'Kar and Ka'Van smother him with kindness. I've never figured out the relationships between the Narn Marines, but those two seem very fond of their Sergeant."

Gideon smiled. "I don't ask. It was difficult enough to get No'Kar to agree to give up guard duty on Deborah. I had to phrase it as a direct order to get No'Kar to join Ka'Van in looking out for G'Tan. Somehow, the idea of having a Narn Marine sitting outside our bedroom door didn't appeal last night."

Luke laughed, glancing at Deborah, and Gideon saw that she had blushed again. [I'm going to pay for teasing her like this. I hope.] The Captain knew that he was pushing his luck and he was taking advantage of his wife feeling particularly tender toward him at that moment. [Maybe she won't hit me while I'm still weak.] Somehow, he doubted it.

The doctor left the hall, asking them to call him when the shuttle landed, as he'd need to give them all anti-nausea shots before the journey. Deborah chuckled softly as he left, murmuring, "I wonder if he'll take his own medicine this time? I'll have to tell him that I don't want a shot again, and I guess I'll have to tell him why this time." She looked around at Gideon and smiled softly, "Do you mind if the rest of the family knows about our little one so soon?" Her hand moved to her belly, and Gideon rested his hand over hers.

"They'll find out sooner or later. May as well make it sooner. But maybe we'd better hold off telling Marcus for a while. He's got enough going on with the move back to Earth. We don't want to give him something else to worry about." He smiled fondly as he thought of his son, and how much he was looking forward to seeing the little boy again.

Deborah nodded seriously. "I think that would be best. Maybe we should leave it until after we get settled on Earth, and he's over the worst of the move."

Before Gideon could respond, his attention was drawn to the doorway, as Latharr and a train of attendants swept into the room.

Demon watched the procession entering the hall with mixed feelings. On the one hand, Latharr had been very kind to her during the last couple of weeks. The Priestess had done her best to provide for Demon's needs. Then again, the last few days had been close to the worst in Demon's life, and if she never saw this planet again, or the people who would remind her of this time, it would be too soon for her.

Trying to put the negative thoughts to one side, Demon smiled at Latharr as the Priestess approached. Holding her husband's hand tightly, Demon said, "Before we go back to our ship, I wanted to thank you for everything you have done for me, Latharr. You and your people have been most kind."

Latharr bowed deeply. "We were honored to care for a Child of the Light."

Demon sighed. She could have done without that reminder. She was about to say as much when Latharr straightened, saying, "And now you carry your own child. May she bear the Light into the future, passing it on to future generations."

A wave of fear swept over Demon, as she wondered how the priestess knew about her pregnancy and whether what Latharr had said could be possible.

Could the Vorlon inside her move to her daughter? Would carrying the dormant Vorlon affect her unborn child? Demon felt Matthew go rigid beside her, and she knew that he shared her thoughts and fears. She told herself not to be silly. Marcus hadn't been affected by the Vorlon; why should Mattie be different?

The silence grew as Latharr waited for a response, and Demon didn't know what to say. She was relieved when Matthew cleared his throat and said quietly, "Thank you for your hospitality and good wishes, Latharr. I know that this has been difficult for you, particularly accepting me and the other males in our party in your midst. The efforts you have made to treat us well have been appreciated."

Demon watched as a slow, lazy smile spread across Latharr's lips. "You are most welcome, Captain Matthew Gideon. You provided us with a most potent reason for changing our behavior, on your first night's stay in our castle, and again last night. The Children of the Light are not likely to forget the lesson you taught us. It seems that males have more to offer than just reproduction."

Glancing quickly at her husband, Demon saw a flush quickly suffuse his face. Her own cheeks were burning, as he laughed and bowed to Latharr, saying, "Yes, we do. I'm sure that your future holds many more examples of ways in which your men can contribute to your society." By the time he straightened, Matthew's face had returned to its normal color, and he continued, "The transports should arrive to take your people to their new home within the next twenty days. Before then, the ISA will send a fast ship, and you'll be invited to send a couple of representatives to check out the planet we propose, to make sure it suits you. I'm sure it will."

Latharr nodded, glancing back at Demon and smiling, "The Child of the Light has assured us that our new home will be a paradise compared to this. Perhaps you will visit us there?"

Demon swallowed, vowing to never again go anywhere near the priestesses, or the thing they held. She managed a soft smile as she said, "I'm afraid that's not likely, Latharr. My husband retires from his position soon, and we are returning to our home-world. We have no plans to leave again for the foreseeable future." Which was a polite way of saying, 'Not in a million years, even if I were dragged by wild horses!'

Squeezing Matthew's hand again, needing the security of his touch, Demon bowed politely to Latharr, thanked her again, then she pulled her husband out of the building and down toward the shuttle. She couldn't get off the planet fast enough for her liking, and now only wanted to get back to her home and her son.

The Drakh second in command smiled maliciously. The time for revenge had nearly arrived. News had been delivered to him the previous day that the forces he'd sent out to hunt down the murderers had been destroyed. He'd cursed his lack of air cover, which had prevented him from fighting back against the ships that had killed his people. There had only been two fighters on the planet, one of which had been destroyed by Gideon's fleeing shuttle, and the second taken out by the Excalibur's fighters, while it was still on the ground, firing at the fighters as they searched for the wreckage of the shuttle. The Drakh mining this planet had never needed much air cover before. They had lived peaceably with the local inhabitants, only encouraging the war between the rebels and the priestesses, and supplying weapons, as a matter of principle. The priestesses were allied to the great enemy, so the Drakh automatically supported their foes.

Now the ISA had come to disturb the balance, to evict the Drakh from yet another world, to kill and destroy. Well, today the murderers would find out what it was like to be the weaker party. The message the second in command had sent out days before had finally received a response. It had merely said, "We come," and had given an ETA that was now only hours away. The coding in the message indicated its source. A Drakh mother ship was on its way.

Gideon smiled as Deborah emerged from the bathroom at the back of the shuttle. She looked a lot better than when she'd gone in. The journey up had been particularly rough, and as soon as the shuttle had escaped the atmosphere, and the ride had smoothed, Deborah had lurched out of her seat, almost running for the bathroom. Her face had been a delicate shade of green.

"Are you OK?" The Captain reached out and stroked his wife's cheek, as she refastened her safety harness.

Deborah managed a weak smile as she said, "I'll live. I'd better get used to feeling this way. In a couple of months, I'll be like this all the time. They call it morning sickness, but if this time is anything like it was with Marcus, it will be morning, noon and night sickness. I hope you like how I look when I'm green, as for a few weeks I'll be that color all the time."

Gideon laughed gently, "Maybe it won't be so bad this time. And if it is, I'll love you whatever color you are, and I'll hold your hair back while you throw up."

Deborah smiled and leaned across to kiss his cheek, then waved at the front

viewscreen. "Nearly home."

Gideon looked to the front and saw the *Excalibur* was now in view. His heart lurched at the sight of her. For a while, he'd thought he might never see his ship again. He wondered how he was going to cope with leaving her, handing her over to someone else to command. There was only one person he could bear to pass her onto. He just had to hope...Gideon turned his thoughts abruptly to other concerns. He looked at Lieutenant Jackson, sitting in the co-pilot's seat and asked, "When did the ISA say the White Stars will arrive?"

Jackson turned in her seat to answer. "Three of them should arrive within the next twelve hours. Four more will be here soon after, one of which will take the priestesses' representatives to see their new planet. The mining ships will arrive within the next week. President Sheridan's office has given us orders to proceed to Minbar as soon as the first White Stars arrive. I think they're pretty pissed with Commander Matheson for not having left days ago, when he was first ordered to go."

Gideon silently prayed that John having been proven right would mitigate any annoyance at his having refused to leave. His Captain had still been alive and had been rescued. Gideon could only hope that John hadn't prejudiced his chances of commanding the *Excalibur* by staying at Inesbitrin so long.

Nodding an acknowledgment to Jackson, Gideon leaned back in his seat, watching as Trace piloted the shuttle skillfully into the landing bay.

As they walked across the landing bay, the doors opened and a small blond missile hurled itself across the floor, screaming, "DADDY!!!"

Gideon stooped and swept his son into his arms, hugging Marcus tightly, as the little boy flung his arms around his father's neck and squeezed. After a few moments, the resulting oxygen deprivation made the Captain's head swim, and he managed to gasp out, "Ease up a little, will you? Daddy would like to breathe again sometime soon!"

Marcus pulled back, easing his grip and looking up into his father's face. The little boy's eyes were red and his cheeks stained with tears as he whispered, "I missed you, Daddy. Why did you stay away so long? You won't go away again, will you? Promise?"

Gideon hugged his son again, smiling as he kissed Marcus' cheek. "I got held up,

but no, I won't go away again. I promise. We'll all go to Earth together. You, me, Mummy and Auntie Angel."

As he mentioned her name, Angel appeared in the doorway. Gideon thought she looked pale and tired, but she was still one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. He smiled gently in her direction, shifting his son to one arm, while holding out the other, saying her name softly. "Angel."

The raven-haired beauty stood frozen in the doorway for a moment, then her face crumpled into tears. She cried out, "Matt!" and flung herself toward the Captain. He caught her with his free arm, and hugged her tightly to his side, as she wept into his shoulder. He could barely hear her words between her muffled sobs. "We thought we'd lost you. I couldn't bear that. I'm sick of losing people I love. Oh god, Matt! I'm so glad you're OK."

Gideon stood silently for a moment, holding two of the people he loved most in his arms, very much aware that his wife was standing silently behind him, watching his reunion with their son and her sister. After a few moments, he whispered into Angel's hair, "It's good to be back. I missed you all." He wanted to say so much more. He wanted to tell Angel how much he'd missed her, how much he loved her, but that wouldn't be fair. Not to her, not to Deborah, not to any of them. So he contented himself with kissing Angel gently on the forehead as she looked up at him, her bright blue eyes filled with tears and with love.

Clearing his throat, the Captain smiled at his son and said, "What about Mummy? Don't you have a hug for her?" He was startled when his son shook his head and pouted.

"No. Don't like Mummy. Don't want Mummy. She promised she'd come back, and she didn't."

Gideon heard Deborah catch her breath behind them, and turned to look at her, while still holding Marcus in one arm, and hugging Angel against his side with the other. Deborah's face was a mask, impassive and unemotional. Even so, Gideon knew she was hurting badly, her son's words and feelings having cut deep.

Turning to look at Marcus, Gideon frowned, "That's not fair, Marcus. Mummy had to find me. She couldn't help staying away."

The expression on Marcus' face couldn't have been more stubborn as he shook his head. "Don't care." Gideon sighed. His son had inherited a strong streak of pigheadedness from both his parents, and wouldn't be easily persuaded to

forgive his mother for what he saw as her desertion. The Captain sighed again. He really didn't have time for this, needing to get back to the bridge, needing to get a report out to Sheridan, needing to do ten thousand other things, besides trying to talk sense to a sulky four year old.

Deborah solved his dilemma, when she stepped forward and said coolly, "Don't worry, Matthew. Marcus and I will sort this out. For the moment, he can stay with Angel, if that's what he wants, and if Angel is willing to take him for a while."

Gideon looked down at Angel, who still clung to his side, and she smiled back up at him sadly. "That's fine. Marcus still has a lot of his things in my rooms, so he can come back with me for now, and help me pack them away. OK, Marcus?"

The little boy's pout deepened, but he agreed to go with his aunt. Gideon's arm was beginning to ache badly where he had been holding Marcus, so he gently put the little boy down, and released his hold on Angel. Marcus immediately moved to take his aunt's hand, and with a smile and a wave, they left the landing bay together.

Gideon moved toward his wife, but she held up her hand and gave him a weak smile. "I'm fine. We'll sort it out later. Go do what you have to do."

He took her in his arms and hugged her gently, pulling her head down until he could kiss her forehead, then breathing into her ear, "I love you." Then he turned and went to leave the landing bay, pausing only to interrupt Lily's passionate reunion with Luke.

"If you two can untangle yourselves for a moment..." Lily broke the passionate kiss she'd been giving Luke and rushed over to Gideon, throwing her arms around his waist, and hugging him fiercely.

"We missed you, Matt. Welcome home."

Gideon laughed and kissed Lily gently, then turned to Luke. "Keep me informed on G'Tan's progress." The Narn Marine had been barely conscious during the transfer from the surface, and his stretcher had been carried out of the landing bay, escorted by the two female Narn Marines, while Gideon had been reunited with his family.

Luke nodded and gave Gideon a sketchy salute. "Yes, Sir!"

Gideon laughed and turned to Jackson, who stood waiting patiently by the door. "Let's go, Lieutenant."

John turned as a voice announced, "Captain on the bridge." They were the words John had longed to hear, but had feared he'd never hear again about this Captain. He stood quickly to face Gideon, as he strode onto the bridge.

John could see the lines of fatigue that still marked the Captain's face, but overall, Gideon seemed to have endured the trials of the past twelve days pretty well. The Captain stopped abruptly, facing his XO, his face deadpan as he said softly, "I hear you've been disobeying orders, Commander. I wonder who could possibly have set you that example?" Gideon's poker face cracked, as the corner of his mouth quirked into a half smile.

"I have no idea, Captain. Please accept my apologies. I'll try not to do it again. Next time you get lost, I'll leave you to find your own way home." John kept his own expression completely deadpan as he replied, all the time feeling a bubbling wave of joy surging inside him at the sight of his old friend, safe and well.

Gideon laughed, and held out his hand, a gesture of trust that few 'normals' felt comfortable with making toward a telepath. "Thank you, John." The words held more feeling and more meaning than a long speech of praise and thanks from anyone else in the universe.

John grasped Gideon's hand tightly, blocking carefully, but seeing in the Captain's eyes all the feelings and thoughts that the telepath would never allow himself to read directly.

"You're very welcome." John whispered the words back, swallowing a lump in his throat the size of a shuttle.

The moment of intense emotion was broken by Ankaren's voice from the Sensor station. "Jump point opening."

John turned to look at the front viewscreen, his Captain sliding smoothly into his chair. Pulling his headset from his pocket, John attached it to his ear and slid easily into his accustomed role as Exec. As he listened to the data streaming into his ear, John said, "It must be one of the White Stars. They're earlier than..." He broke off suddenly, and whipped his head around to stare at the Sensor station. "Battle stations, battle stations, all hands to battle stations."

Gideon leaped out of his chair and strode toward the front of the bridge, watching as the jump point opened in front of them and a Drakh mother ship surged through.

"What the fuck?" The Captain's words were cut off, as the Excalibur was rocked by the opening shots from the enemy ship.

John listened intently, and passed the key information to his Captain. "Drakh mother ship. Fully armed, fighters deploying, coming right at us."

Gideon paused only briefly, then said quietly, "I've had enough of these bastards. Bring the main gun on line."

John glanced around, about to question, but when he saw the look on Gideon's face, he knew it was pointless. He passed on the order, paused for a moment then reported, "Main gun on line. Drakh mother ship targeted." The Excalibur rocked again, as another shot hit their plasteel crystalline alloy hull. "Hull integrity down to 85%."

"Fire."

All instruments on the bridge died. The minute it took for the engines to recharge and bring power back on line, seemed to take forever. John looked around at Gideon and said softly, so no one could overhear, "I hope they were alone."

Gideon raised an eyebrow. "We'll know soon enough."

They stood in silence, watching as the viewscreen came back up, showing a backdrop of blackness, the foreground littered with sparkling fragments of debris. The largest piece of the Drakh ship still intact couldn't have measured more than a meter across. After watching the debris field in silence for a few minutes, Gideon sighed. "Looks like they came alone. Probably thought they could tackle us one on one. They should have learned better by now."

John nodded, wondering to himself if he'd have gambled in the way Gideon just had. If he'd still had command when the Drakh ship arrived, would he have tried to fight it with their more conventional weapons? Gideon seemed to know instinctively when he could afford to use the power of the main guns, and when not to. John wondered whether he would ever acquire that instinct. Without it, was he really the right commander for the Excalibur? John pushed all his doubts to one side and looked at his Captain, as Gideon sighed.

"The priestesses will get a pretty light show when that debris hits the

atmosphere and burns. They'll probably think it's some sort of sign from their gods. OK, stay on alert, and call me when the White Stars arrive," he paused and grinned at John, "or anyone else, for that matter." Gideon groaned softly as he continued, "I'll be in my office, putting a report together for Sheridan, and clearing twelve days worth of paperwork." The Captain turned and started to leave the bridge

John called out after him, "Yes, Sir. Oh, and by the way," he paused as Gideon stopped and looked back. "Welcome home, Matthew."

Gideon smiled. "It's good to be home, John. Thanks again for waiting for me."

John nodded, then turned to the front of the bridge, starting to organize the clean up operation outside. As he gave orders he thought, [Matthew is home, the battle is won, and he's moaning about paperwork already. All's well with the world.] He hadn't felt this good in weeks.

"What do you want for dinner tonight? You can have anything you want, to celebrate us all being back together again." Gideon grinned as he looked down at his son, gripping his hand firmly. After a few hours preparing and reading reports, the Captain had decided to stop for the day and head for home. They'd received a call that the White Stars would get there in three hours time, and Gideon had left orders for the Excalibur to depart for Minbar immediately after their arrival. He'd then stopped off at Angel's quarters to pick up his son.

The more private reunion with Angel had been even more emotional, and Gideon had held the weeping woman tightly, controlling himself sternly, as Marcus had watched them round eyed. The Captain knew that Angel's tears were as much for her losses in the past few months as for her happiness over his return, and he knew that there was little he could do for her, other than hold her, and be there for her, while she cried. Anything more, much as he longed to comfort her more intimately, would lead to more pain and confusion for them all. So under his son's puzzled gaze, he'd hugged Angel tightly, and kissed her hair and forehead, avoiding the danger zone of her soft, inviting lips.

When he'd finally left Angel's rooms, with Marcus' hand in his, he'd tried to answer his son's questions about why Auntie Angel was so upset, in a calm and detached manner. He'd explained how people sometimes cried when they were happy, and how Angel was both happy and sad at once, a fact that puzzled Marcus considerably. After a while, Gideon had decided it was time to change the subject, and food was something that could always be relied upon to distract

his son's attention.

"Pizza! Can we have pizza? With lots of cheese? And ice cream after?" Marcus' grin was as wide as his face, and Gideon laughed.

"Yes, we can have pizza. With lots of cheese. And ice cream. We'll have to see what flavor Mummy has in the freezer. Have you spoken to Mummy since she got back?" Gideon watched as Marcus' grin disappeared and was replaced by a stubborn frown.

"No. She kept trying to link to me, but I wouldn't let her. Don't want to talk to Mummy. Don't like Mummy." Marcus looked up at his father, his expression changing to a wheedling smile. "Can't we have pizza and ice cream in the mess hall? Just you and me?"

Gideon sighed and shook his head, reaching up to touch the door lock to their quarters with his free hand. As the doors opened, he said, "That's not kind, Marcus. Your Mummy only did what she had to. Now where is she?"

Deborah wasn't in the main living area, and a quick glance showed she wasn't in her bedroom either. Gideon was puzzled. Where would she have gone? He led a pouting Marcus through into his old quarters, thinking she might be working at his desk, but that room was empty, too. He was about to call her on his commlink, when he heard his son gasp. Looking down, he saw Marcus pointing to his bedroom. "She's in there."

Gideon saw that the little boy's eyes had filled with tears, and he asked, "What is it? What's the matter?"

A tear trickled down Marcus' cheek as he answered, "She's crying. Mummy's crying."

Gideon rushed to the bedroom door, and as it opened, he saw Deborah curled up on Marcus' bed, with her back to the door. Hearing the sound of the door opening behind her, she rolled over, and Gideon could see that Marcus had been right. She was crying, and she was hugging Half-Ted in her arms.

Before he could move or speak, Gideon felt Marcus wrench his hand away, and watched as the little boy ran over to the bed, flinging himself at his mother as she sat upright.

"I'm sorry, Mummy! Don't cry! I didn't mean to make you cry!"

Deborah swept Marcus into her arms, hugging him tightly, and crying harder than ever, but Gideon could feel her waves of relief and joy sweeping through the room. He watched as his wife and son both closed their eyes, and he knew they were linking, speaking with their minds and feelings. For a moment, he felt lonely and excluded, but then two blonde heads turned toward him, and the two faces he loved most both smiled at him. Both had tear stained cheeks and red eyes, but to him, they were still the most beautiful sight in the universe.

His wife stretched out one arm, while still hugging Marcus to her with the other, and whispered, "Matthew."

It was all Gideon needed. He went and sat on the bed next to Deborah, pulling her close, while Marcus sat across them. Putting his other arm around his son, Gideon pulled them both into a fierce hug, kissed them both gently, then smiled, saying, "OK, I'm starving. Who's for pizza?"

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