

The Witches of Eriadne: *Interlude Five A - Part 3: Lost in Space*

by *The Space Witches*



Baby

Chapter 2

24th May 2284

Three long, slow, frustrating days later, I called for another break in negotiations. We were making progress, but at about the same rate as continental drift.

The Nabulans were obsessed with detail. And after days of detailed talks about the exact terms of their membership in the ISA, they'd decided they didn't want to become full members after all, but rather allies, with reciprocal trading and territorial rights. This had led us into new discussions about which nearby star systems fell under their protection and which remained in ISA jurisdiction.

This was an area where I had to tread carefully. The systems under discussion were close to the Drazi Freehold, and I knew that I couldn't afford to give anything away which might impinge on Drazi sensitivities. As a species, the Drazi are truculent at best and unreasonably bad tempered more often than not.

I think the Drazi invented PMS.

They're also very possessive about their territory, particularly since they'd suffered from the Dilgar invasion back in the 30's and from Centauri encroachments in 2260.

So step by agonizing step, Deborah and I went through each system that the Nabulans claimed, identifying exactly what issues could be important to them, and which were just general posturing.

Without my wife at my side, I think I'd have given up and gone home. Trying to figure out what the bastards really wanted would have driven me nuts. Deborah was able to advise me that most of the time they were just being difficult for the hell of it.

They actually enjoyed conflict and argument. It was all just a game to them. And they wouldn't even discuss putting us in contact with the race attacking the ISA borders before we had their own position in relation to the ISA detailed, documented, signed sealed and delivered.

Bastards.

I'd taken the opportunity, while talking through their territorial demands, to ask why they hadn't exploited more of their own planetary resources. They'd told us in no uncertain terms that they considered the rest of Nabula to be a cold, barren wasteland.

"There is nothing on any other continent that can sustain our physical requirements." The lead negotiator had screeched that sentence out with a pomposity that made listening to him/her/it-I didn't know which sex s/he was and frankly didn't care--even more painful than usual.

I knew the Nabulans were omnivorous, having had the misfortune to watch them eating at times during the negotiations. That was a sight which had quashed my own appetite for hours afterwards. By comparison, my son Marcus was the epitome of good table manners when he was three years old.

Perhaps the lack of animal life on the other continents made it impossible for the Nabulans to survive there, particularly when combined with the cooler, dryer atmosphere that prevailed elsewhere on the planet.

The good news was that this announcement made it much less likely that our explorations on the southern island would be detected. The Nabulans apparently had little interest in the rest of their planet.

When we finally nailed down which stars, planets and even moons and asteroids belonged to each territory (the Nabulans insisted they might want to mine the latter at some stage in the future so it was important that we should be precise about exactly which ones they had rights over) both Deborah and I needed a break.

So at the end of another long day we advised the Nabulan negotiators that we were taking two days off to rest. Then we headed back to the Excalibur.

We got back just in time to decontaminate, shower ourselves clean and get dressed before the ship carrying Max, Dureena and Ilas arrived.

Once Ivanova had agreed to let the Eilerson ménage in on our discoveries, she'd acted quickly and decisively, calling for a White Star to collect them from Mars, where the family had been taking a vacation at the time. Vya had sent a coded message through the Rangers, explaining to his family why it was urgent that they interrupt their break, and Max et al had responded immediately.

Deborah and I joined Lily, Luke, John, Angel and Jack down in the landing bay, as the Ranger shuttle brought the latest arrivals over to the Excalibur. We waited patiently--well, some of us were



patient. Angel was hopping from foot to foot--behind the force fields while the shuttle landed and the ramp descended.

I'd expected Ilas to come bursting out of the shuttle, racing down to meet her sisters in her usual excitable puppy-dog fashion. I was a little surprised when there was a long pause before Max and Ilas appeared in the doorway and slowly made their way down the ramp. Max escorted Ilas on one side, while Vya held her

arm on the other.

I was shocked by how elderly Ilas looked. She was only around thirty Earth years old, but she looked much, much older. Her hair was now white, and she hadn't bothered to shift into her favorite blue haired, white skinned appearance. Her skin was a washed out yellow, a pallid version of her son's youthful golden glow. A nasty scar that I'd never seen before ran down the length of her right cheek. I wondered if this was a new injury or whether Ilas no longer had the inclination--or the strength--to conceal it.

Deborah's hand tightened on mine, and I felt a ripple of her pain as she saw her younger sister. Since Angel had linked their minds again on Eriadne four years before, the sisters had stayed in contact mentally, rarely bothering with messages or view-screens. So Deborah, Angel and Lily had not seen their sister physically for a couple of years, and her appearance obviously shocked them as much as it did me.

Deborah let go of my hand and moved forward, joining Angel and Lily as they rushed to gather their youngest sister into their arms. As they took her from Max, I realized that he and Vya had been supporting Ilas, half-holding her up, and that she was no longer able to walk unaided.

I closed my eyes and swallowed the lump that threatened to choke me. The years had been much kinder to the other sisters, but this glimpse of mortality was frightening. I couldn't help but wonder how much longer we would all have together. Deborah and I had been married for nearly fifteen glorious years, through good times and bad, but it was nowhere near long enough. A lifetime wouldn't be enough.

When I collected myself and opened my eyes again, I looked at Max, and stepped toward him, holding out my hand. He looked half-surprised, but took my hand in his, clasping it firmly. Max, too, had aged, but less obviously than his partner. His hair was grey, and his face lined, but he didn't look his age, which was well into his sixties by then. Ilas looked at least ten years his senior.

"Captain." Max nodded, and I grinned while shaking my head.

"Old habits die hard it seems, Max." I winced as I realized I'd used a cliché, something Max would never do, and forged on, "Not Captain any more. Just Matt."

Max's eyes twinkled with mischief, as brilliantly blue as ever. "Mats are things I trample on. Perhaps you'd be safer if I kept calling you Captain."

I laughed and was about to ask him where Dureena was, when movement at the top of the ramp attracted my attention.

Two women appeared in the doorway, one young and one old. The younger woman's appearance was heart-stoppingly familiar; she looked so similar to the way Dureena had looked when I had first met her. More slender, and without the most obviously womanly attributes Dureena had always displayed so proudly, but her face, her hair and her lithe grace all clearly indicated who she was.

This was Ilori, the daughter Dureena had longed for, and who had been conceived in love and passion, with Ilas shifting into a Zanderi male, to inseminate the little thief. I knew Max had played some part in the conception too, but I'd always avoided the details. I really didn't need images of Max's sexual activities in my head. The 'special' vid of his that I'd once seen had been quite enough for my more conservative tastes. I didn't need any more exotic images to deal with.

OK, so some of the things Deborah and I get up to are probably not what some people would think of as 'conservative'. But we stick to one-on-one heterosexual activities within our own species. Believe me, within our family, that makes us real stick-in-the-muds!

Ilori was now approaching thirteen years old. I could never forget her age, just as I'd never forget her birth. I'd been proud to stand in as Dureena's father for that event, and I'd been caught up in the middle of the drama when Luke had been forced to carry out an emergency C-section, Alwyn had collapsed, Ishtar--Alwyn's pet dragon and familiar--had crashed her way into the delivery room, and Galen had jolted Alwyn back to life.

See what my family life is like? Never a dull moment.

Anyway, Ilori had grown from one of the most beautiful babies I had ever seen--unlike my son Marcus, who'd looked like a red, screaming prune when he was born--into a beautiful young woman. Dureena's race, like Ilas', aged more rapidly than humans, so Ilori looked more mature than her twelve years, but she still hadn't blossomed into full womanhood. She was slender and willowy, but her every movement spoke of her grace and femininity, and the promise of stunning sexuality to come, just like her mother.

Dureena had never talked much about her own childhood and upbringing, but I knew she had been sold as a slave at about the age Ilori was now. Looking at the beautiful girl standing at the top of the shuttle ramp, I winced as I wondered exactly what sort of slave Dureena had been. There were many perverts in this galaxy who would pay a high price to own and abuse such beauty. Had Dureena been abused in that way? Had her apprenticeship as a thief been her escape from sexual slavery? I shuddered as I shifted my eyes to the older woman standing next to the beautiful young girl, held up and supported by her.

For the second time that day, I was appalled to see the ravages worked by time on an old friend. This was Dureena, and she was old. Her hair, like Ilas', was pure white, and her face scored with lines of age. Her yellow eyes, once full of fire and life, were now dulled by age and infirmity.

Dureena no longer wore the leather, skin-tight clothes than had once been her hallmark. Now she was draped in a loose caftan, which concealed the damage that time had done to her body.

llori supported her as step by faltering step she made her way down the ramp to where John, Luke, Jack and I stood waiting with Max and Vya.

The sisters were still huddled together, silently communing, freeing the rest of us for our reunion.

For a moment, I wished I hadn't persuaded Ivanova to change her mind. I wished I had never seen Dureena again, looking so old and frail. I wanted to remember her how she had been when we had first met, full of life, energy and pissy attitude. I'd liked her from the first time she'd growled at me, fighting with the security men who were trying to restrain her.

I'd threatened the idiot Senator who was trying to keep her away from me that I'd quit as Captain of the Excalibur if she weren't allowed to join us. A bluff, of course, but he hadn't known that. I'd just wanted to see how desperate they were to have me as Captain, knowing that I'd have a bigger fight on my hands later, when asking for John Matheson--the first human telepath to be allowed to join Earthforce--as my first officer. I'd won both battles and gotten the crew I'd needed to help me find the cure for the Drakh plague.

Now I was faced with the wreckage of that vibrant, aggressive hell cat who I'd been so proud to call my daughter on the day llori was born. Now, Dureena looked more like my mother than my daughter.

I held my arms out, and llori led her to me. In the past I would have held Dureena carefully because I would have been wary about what sharp objects she might have concealed about her person. That day, I held her gently because I was scared she might break if I squeezed too tight. She looked that fragile.

Dureena rested her head against my shoulder for a moment, then looked up at me and smiled. For a moment, some of her old life and energy flashed in her golden eyes as she said, "You look a damn sight better than I do, Captain. Maybe being human isn't such a bad thing as I've always thought."

I laughed softly, leaning forward to kiss her forehead, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall as I said, "Humans can't be all bad, Dureena. You've lived with one for fifteen years, after all."

Max chuckled as he moved in to gently take Dureena from me, supporting her as llori had done and saying, "At last. Gideon finally admits that I'm human. We should all go out and celebrate."

His words brought back memories of a time years before when we had indeed celebrated. The whole extended family had met up on Babylon 5 at the end of 2270 and we'd partied late into the night at the Fresh Air restaurant. Max had looked spiffy in an immaculate tuxedo, while his women had clung to his arms, each equally beautiful in their own inimitable way.

We'd danced the night away--OK, some of the others had danced. I'd just held onto my wife's butt and shuffled, but I'd been happy and so had Deborah--with Max and Dureena giving us a demonstration of a tango he'd claimed to have taught her on Mars. While it wasn't up to John and

Lily's standard, it was damned sexy, and Dureena's cat-like, alien grace had added a unique twist to the dance.

Now Max led Dureena, not in a dance, but in a faltering shuffle, as they left the landing bay together, Vya providing additional support for his other mother. The sisters departed together in a group, holding Ilas gently between them, followed quickly by John and Luke, who smiled down at Ilori as she walked beside them. They pointed out different parts of the ship as they went, and the young woman looked around with wide eyes and breathless excitement as her two uncles escorted her out.

That left Jack and me standing in the landing bay, brooding.

We're good at that.

After a few moments of silence, Jack sighed deeply and turned to me. His eyes showed the pain I was sure was reflected in mine, and I was glad no one else was present to witness our sorrow.

Jack said softly, "I thought the way Dureena died in my universe was cruel, but now I'm not so sure. At least that was over quickly."

I swallowed and nodded, unable to speak as I followed him out of the landing bay, hoping that Deborah would be waiting for me back in our quarters. I needed her presence, her comfort and her love like I'd never needed them before.

That night in bed, I held Deborah tightly, feeling her soft body against mine, feeling her love like a light holding back the darkness. We had made love with a tenderness and intensity that had left us both in tears and now we held each other, all passions spent, with only our love for each other remaining.

Deborah's head rested on my shoulder, her arm across my chest and her long legs intertwined with mine. We couldn't get physically closer without me being inside her, and there was a pretty good chance that would happen again soon. That night more than any other, I wanted to bury myself in her, seeking the comfort that she alone could bring me.

But for that moment we lay quietly, marshalling our energies.

Deborah sighed, her breath stirring the hairs on my chest. Hairs which that night I was all too aware were turning gray.

"Ilas spoke to me in the merge."

I turned my head to look down at her, puzzled. As far as I understood it--which wasn't much--the sisters lost their individuality when they merged, so I didn't understand how one of them could 'speak' to another when they were in that state.

Deborah's next words explained. "She held me back as we separated, and spoke to me when Angel and Lily had gone."

There was a long pause, and I wondered if Deborah had gone to sleep, when I felt the wetness of her tears on my chest. Her voice broke as she said, "Ilas told me that she's dying."

I hugged my wife as hard as I could as she sobbed into my shoulder. I said nothing. There was nothing to say. No words of reassurance could change the future.

After a few minutes, Deborah collected herself and went on, "She said that Dureena is nearing the end of her days, too, and she's scared that Max won't survive them long." Deborah's voice wobbled but steadied as she forced herself to go on. "Ilas knows that people born on Mars tend to have shorter lives than Earth born humans, and although Max looks younger than his age, she told me he's been having some health problems. Heart problems."

I kept my silence, but decided to find a moment to have a quiet word with Luke about Max's condition. I didn't doubt what Deborah was telling me, or what Ilas had told her, but I wanted an independent opinion and Luke Raven was one of the two best doctors I'd ever known. I didn't say anything to Deborah but I believed if anyone could help Max, it would be Luke. Technology had made incredible advances over the centuries, and if it were possible to replace a failing heart in some way, Luke would know.

Deborah continued. "Ilas is worried about Ilori. Vya is a good brother, but his work with the Rangers would never allow him to give his sister a home. And Ilas doesn't want Ilori to be looked after by strangers."

I snorted, "As if we'd ever let that happen."

Deborah lifted her head and looked up at me, her eyes still wet, but full of love and hope. "Do you mean that? Because that's what Ilas wants. She wants us to give Ilori a home if anything happens to her, Max and Dureena."

I kissed Deborah's forehead and smiled. "Stupid question. It's a good job I have a weakness for dumb blondes." That earned me a thump on the chest that I ignored as I went on, "Ilori will always have a home with us, as would all the children, if anything happened to their parents. We're family."

Deborah started to cry again, but this time they were happy tears. Anyone looking at my wife when we're in public would never guess what an emotional woman she is underneath all that control. But when we're alone she laughs easily and she cries easily, and I love it when she does either, or both, as she did then.



"I love you, Matthew Gideon."

Her golden eyes glowed with her love as she gazed up at me adoringly. How could I ever say no when she looked at me like that?

I chuckled as I kissed her lips and said softly. "Good. Because I love you, too. And I'm about to prove it again, in the way you like best."

What we did then is none of your business, but it put Max Eilerson's special videos to shame.

25th May 2284

The following day we all went down to the planet. When I say 'all', I mean the whole family. Every single adult anyway.

Ilas and Dureena insisted on accompanying Vya and Max on the inspection of the ruins, despite Luke's advice that they should both rest after their journey and the reunion dinner John had hosted the previous evening. Their increasing physical fragility had done nothing to quell the feisty personalities of both women, and their responses to Luke's suggestion had been short and to the point. We'd all been left in no doubt that the two women were joining us at the exploration site.

John and Lily had also decided to join us, with John taking one of his rare rest days to change into civilian clothes and take part in our explorations. I couldn't help but smile as I saw him standing with his partners in the landing bay, waiting to board one of the Excalibur's shuttles.

John seemed to be following my example as he got older, and had allowed his hair to grow beyond what was strictly regulation length. It delighted me that my protégé had found the confidence to bend the rules, even in such a small way. I'd always been a firm believer that rules were made to be bent and circumvented, if not actually broken.

Lily stood next to him, dressed in an unusually practical manner, for her. Gone were the filmy materials and lacy trims that normally adorned her tiny body. Today she wore a simple black skirt that fell to just below her knees, with sturdy boots on her feet. Her blouse was a brilliant emerald green, the buttons of which were stretched by her generous breasts, leaving a delightful view of her cleavage for the assembled males--and females if they were that way inclined--to enjoy.

Luke Raven also joined the expedition, in his role as Head of Life Sciences on board the Excalibur. He'd given us all an update on his team's findings over dinner the previous evening.

They'd compared the DNA samples we couldn't help but collect from the Nabulans--the slimy, smelly bastards had decided they liked the human custom of shaking hands, and had taken to clasping Deborah's and my hands in a bone-crushing grip at the start of each day's discussions. This left a slimy residue which had delighted Luke, as it gave him the opportunity to collect the samples, but disgusted my wife and me, as it took hard scrubbing and lots of soap to remove the lingering smell. Anyway, Luke had compared those samples with pieces of vegetation from the southern island.

"The samples have absolutely nothing in common. They represent two completely independent evolutionary channels, right down to the chemical levels."

Now that was odd. Our experience had generally been that life on each planet had distinct chemical patterns, each unique to the planet on which that life had evolved. So even though humans and Centauri and Minbari all looked similar on a superficial level, each species had a completely

different chemical make-up. However, a human and an Earth lichen were related at that fundamental level. Having evolved on the same planet, we had chemical origins in common.

The fact that the Nabulans had a different chemical base to the plant life on the southern island raised some interesting questions. Questions to which I hoped we'd soon find answers.

So Luke had decided to accompany that day's expedition, being particularly interested in a new site on the island that Vya had discovered the previous day. He, John and Lily boarded the Excalibur's shuttle while Deborah and I went with Max, Ilas, Dureena, Vya and Ilori on board the Angel's Rest.

G'Tan and No'Kar stood inside the cargo bay, waiting to escort us all to our seats, then they joined Jack and Angel on the bridge and we took off.

The journey down to the island was smooth and uneventful, but it gave me the opportunity to watch the Eilerson family interacting as a unit. Ilas and Vya were the most animated of the group, chatting cheerfully and teasing the others affectionately. Max and Dureena joined in occasionally, while Ilori remained quiet, her large, yellow eyes taking in everything around her. She was a sweet child, but quiet and a little withdrawn. In personality, she didn't seem to take after either Dureena, her mother, or Ilas, her father.

And yes, I know Ilas is a woman. When she wants to be. I keep telling you; my family is complicated.

When we landed, after the usual careful approach over the southern polar regions to avoid detection--a tactic which seemed to have been successful so far, as the Nabulans had given no indication that they were aware of our clandestine activities--G'Tan and No'Kar reappeared, this time each holding a collapsible camp chair. They escorted Ilas and Dureena carefully down the ramp, while the rest of us followed slowly, joining the people from the Excalibur who awaited us outside.

Ilas and Dureena were quickly set up, seated in comfort, where they could see most of the large site that had now been cleared. As the rest of us set to work carrying out the equipment that Max had loaded onto the Angel's Rest, the two women enlivened proceedings with frequent interjections about the men's strength and virility--mostly uncomplimentary--and kept themselves, as well as everyone else, amused at our expense.

When we had finally unloaded everything--I still don't know why Max always insists on carrying so much equipment when the only tools I have ever seen him wield are a torch and a small brush--we split up into teams.

Jack, Angel, Deborah, Lily and Ilori stayed close to where Ilas and Dureena sat, clearing more of the vegetation from the ruins. I noticed that Jack gave G'Tan and No'Kar some subtle hand-signals and realized that my alter ego had asked the Narns to act as guards for the two elderly women.

It was a depressing thought. There had been a time when Ilas and Dureena had been amongst the most fearsome fighters I had ever known. In their heyday they could have taken out the two Narn

ex-Marines with just their hands. Now they were barely able to walk down a ramp and settle themselves in the sun.

But what they lacked in physical vigor they certainly made up for in verbal acerbity. In an attempt to escape the unflattering observations aimed in my direction, I joined Max, Vya, Luke and John, leaving the main group to be shown the latest discoveries.

What can I say? I've never had a problem with retreat as a strategy. There are times when running away is definitely the best tactic.

It had taken a lot of charm and persuasion to prevent Ilas from accompanying us on this side-trip. When she'd heard that her son had found a new site that promised even more information about the species that had inhabited the ruins, she'd been eager to join us. Vya had explained gently that the path to the new site hadn't yet been cleared, and the route might be too arduous for his mother. Ilas had started to protest, but Vya had leaned close to her and whispered something which had calmed her.

I decided to ask him later what he'd said. If it worked on Ilas, maybe it would work on Deborah when she got stubborn, and I could always do with any help I could get in that direction.

So the five of us made our way through a section of undergrowth, quickly leaving behind the sounds of the others, moving into an area where the silence was almost tangible and oppressive. John unbuttoned the collar of his crisp, white shirt as the humidity increased. Back at the main site, a cool breeze had swept across the plateau, making the sunny day pleasant to work in, but here in the jungle, the wind didn't penetrate and the heat soon became unpleasant. And the Nabulans thought this continent was too cold and dry!

Vya led the way, easily pushing aside tough plants with enlarged, strengthened arms. As we made our way through the jungle, I asked Luke about the apparent absence of animal life.

"You should attend the daily briefings, Matt, if you want to be kept up to date." Luke grinned round at me as I followed him down the path Vya was guiding us along.

I snorted. "It was a choice between attending your briefings and showering when we got back from the negotiations. Would you have wanted me to attend before I washed?"

Luke laughed. "No way! You'd have cleared the room instantly." Then he went on to bring me up to date with the latest findings from his botanists and biologists.

"As far as we can tell, there was some form of ecological disaster, several hundred years ago. Maybe around a thousand years back." Luke gave me a significant look.

Another coincidence of timing? Maybe.

Or maybe not.

Luke went on, "Whatever happened seems to have wiped out nearly all animal life on this island, and all the plant life that depended on animals and insects for fertilization died off soon afterwards. Around 99% of all species, animal and vegetable, were lost. The only survivors seem to

have been those plants that could reproduce without animal assistance. Whatever happened here makes the extinction of the dinosaurs on Earth look like a minor blip in the eco-system. And it happened a damn sight quicker."

That was a scary thought, but I said nothing and waved at Luke to continue. I could see that Max was listening attentively as he walked in front of Luke and me, occasionally glancing back at us as we made our slow way through the jungle.

Luke said, "From what Vya has told me about the site we're going to see now, there are some indications that a few survivors were able to adapt to whatever it was that killed the majority, and they lived off the remaining, limited plant life. Over the last thousand years, those plants have grown unchecked by competition, and now cover the whole island."

The bit about the survivors was news to me and I looked ahead to see if I could ask Vya about this, but he was fully occupied with tracking our way through the undergrowth, with John at his side. I decided that stinky or not, I was attending all future briefings.

I asked Luke, "Any idea what caused this collapse?" I guess it was inevitable that my mind immediately jumped to thoughts of plague. The Shadows had used that weapon before, and the ecological disaster that had hit this planet was suspiciously close in time to the last great Shadow War.

Luke glanced at me and obviously knew where my thoughts were headed. "Not yet. It could have been biological, meteorological or even radiation poisoning of some kind. We're working on it." He paused, then added, grimly, "But I have my suspicions."

Luke turned his attention back to climbing over the tumbled boulders that obstructed our path leaving me time to brood as I followed him. So now we had a number of mysteries, which I ran through in my mind.

First, we had a race attacking our shipping which was completely unknown to us. After nearly two weeks of negotiations with the Nabulans we were no closer to finding out who that race were, where they came from or why they were attacking us.

Second, the Nabulans might not have evolved on this planet. Their cellular structures were fundamentally different to other species on the planet. So who were they and where had they come from?

Third, we had ruins which appeared to have been built by another species altogether, one possibly related in some way to Vya and Ilas. I suddenly wondered whether Luke had carried out any comparisons between the two shape-shifters' DNA and that of the southern island plant life.

I looked up from my climbing to ask Luke, and nearly fell. The boulders were treacherous, covered in a damp, moss-like substance, and needed full concentration. I decided to wait until later and went back to my brooding and climbing.

Finally, we had the mystery of why and when the Southern island sapient life forms had disappeared. Were they completely extinct now? Or was it possible that a few survivors might

remain in a remote location somewhere on the planet? The peculiar planetary fields prevented our sensors from carrying out normal life form scanning, and even after nearly a week of exploration, we hadn't completed the over-flying survey of this one island. It could take years to carry out a comprehensive search of the rest of the planet to see if there might be survivors.

And let's not forget the mystery that had brought us to this island. The flaming light in the sky, perhaps a ship, that had come down somewhere in this vicinity, roughly five years before. We still hadn't found a crash site. Whether it had been a meteor or a ship, it should have left a crater somewhere, unless it had crashed into the sea, falling short of the island.

Too many mysteries. I really hate unanswered questions. My wife may say I'm nosy, but it's not just that-although it's true, I am nosy.

Ignorance can get you killed, and I plan to live a long time yet. Having so many of my family on this planet full of mysteries made me more nervous than ever. I was just glad that my kids were back on Earth. One less thing to worry about at least.

By the time we arrived at the site of Vya's latest discovery, we were all a little winded, and Vya was having to help his father. It was the first time I could ever recall Max admitting he needed help.



I could see why Vya had said he thought they'd found a cave, but once we'd entered, I realized that the overgrown walls outside were too regular, and that where the undergrowth had been cleared away, we could see the straight sides of the hole through which we stooped to enter. This wasn't a cave; it was a building of some kind.

I looked up at the roof but could see nothing at first. Vya removed the backpack he'd been wearing and handed around high-power torches, one for each of us. It seemed that Rangers, like Boy Scouts, were always prepared.

We stood on the flat floor-itself a clue to the non-natural origins of the place-and shone our lights on the walls and ceiling. All were flat and even, but in many places vines and creepers had broken through the floor and clawed their way up the surface of the walls, obscuring the stonework behind them. Despite this, we could see that the

walls were covered in images.

What was immediately apparent was that the decoration on the walls was different to the style we'd become used to at the main site. Instead of carvings there were paintings. Paintings toward which Vya eagerly led his father, shining the beam of his torch from one picture to another.

"See? Here and here? Is this what I think it is, Dad?"

Max said nothing, but leaned closer to the pictures, placing his spectacles on his nose to peer more closely.

There was a long pause and we realized that Max wasn't going to pontificate until he'd studied the evidence closely. I got bored staring at Max staring at the pictures, so started to move around the room and studied the images myself.

After a while I began to make some sense of what I was looking at. It wasn't easy. The people who had made the images didn't seem to follow any logical sequence that I could make out at first. The images were interwoven amongst each other, some large, some small, but crawling over, around and through each other in what initially looked like a nightmare of mingled plants, animals, machines and buildings.

The job of trying to figure out what the images portrayed wasn't made easier by the creepers which grew over some portions, but when I reached out to grasp one of them and pull it away, Vya's hand shot out and stopped me.

"Don't. If you pull that away you could bring half the wall down, and we'd lose the images underneath."

Personally, I thought Vya had his priorities wrong. If half the wall came down, it could bring down the ceiling with it and that could kill us. That seemed to me slightly more important than losing a couple of pictures.

I guess I'm not cut out to be a Xeno-archeologist.

I moved my hand back and continued to study the pictures as best I could, following what seemed to be some kind of serpentine animal's body as it snaked up the wall toward the ceiling. The builders of that place must have been very tall-or capable of stretching themselves-to see the uppermost pictures.

I followed the snake's body as it threaded through the images and realized that there was a sequence to the images after all. I followed the snake back to its beginning and started to look at the pictures through which it was threaded.

The first pictures linked by the long, thin animal showed a city, with a sun shining overhead, and people moving around the streets and pathways. Each image was carefully drawn, showing the inhabitants, who looked disturbingly human in form, going about their daily lives. Their activities were obscure, but they looked happy and productive, getting on with their lives.

Then there was a blank patch where the creepers had pulled away the wall's surface, and the next picture I could make out showed something falling from the sun, blanketing the city in mist. When the mist lifted, there were no more people in the scenes. Just uninhabited buildings, streets and open spaces. The buildings showed no sign of damage, but they were empty of the life that had previously inhabited them.

Then there were several sickening images showing bodies piled high. Not just those of the people of the city, but animals too. Forms that were completely alien, and some that were uncomfortably

familiar. Does a dog always have four legs, a nose and a tail, no matter what planet it comes from? Because these people seemed to have had dogs, and they had died with their masters.

Max's body, his nose almost pressed against the wall, obscured the next images, so I moved around him and examined the pictures on his other side.

I could see at once what had got Vya so excited. Many of the people in these pictures didn't look like the earlier images. Some were larger, with longer legs or thicker arms. Each seemed to have adapted themselves in some way for the task they were performing, whether it was running, or carrying heavy loads.

The pictures showed these people carrying each other and their possessions away from the city. But the buildings still looked whole and undamaged, and there was no clue I could see to explain why they were leaving.

Max sighed at last and leaned back from his examination of a few pictures that I hadn't yet seen. He nodded toward where Vya stood, eagerly awaiting his father's pronouncement.

"You were right, Vya. These are the people we've been looking for."

Max's legs started to tremble, and for a moment I thought he was going to fall. Luke and Vya both rushed forward at the same moment, catching the older man and lowering him to a sitting position on the floor.

Luke pulled out a medical scanner and ran it over Max's white and sweaty face then his chest, frowning at whatever he saw there. In the meantime, Vya had retrieved a bottle of water from his rucksack, and held it to his father's lips. Lips that I could swear had a blue tinge to them.

"Max, this was stupid. You shouldn't have done this. Your heart isn't up to the sort of strain the climb up here involved." Luke shook his head and leaned forward to place an injector against Max's neck. There was a hiss of air and whatever drug Luke was using produced an almost instant effect. The color rushed back into Max's face, and the blue tinge receded from his lips.

Max looked up at Luke and gave him a faint smile. His voice was weak, but still full of scorn as he replied, "So you were going to bring this place down to me, were you? This was the only way. Vya knew that. Now help me up."

Luke shook his head. "Not a chance. You sit there for a few minutes and catch your breath. And while you're doing that, you can tell us who these people are."

I was surprised at the command tone Luke used. It seemed that fifteen years of marriage to a starship officer had given him more authority than I remembered. I looked over at John who was standing in the doorway to the room, hands on hips, smiling proudly at his partner.

To my surprise, Max actually did what he was told. Why had he never responded to my orders like that?

Taking a deep breath, Max reached up to take his son's hand and he pulled Vya down to sit next to him. It seemed like a good idea, so the rest of us followed their example. We settled to sit on the

hard ground, listening as Max started to tell his story, breathlessly at first, but with increasing vigor as the drug Luke had administered took hold.

"When I first met your mother, Vya, she showed me writings on the wall of her secret workshop in the castle on Eriadne. We still have no idea how those writings came to be there. Maybe the Vorlons left them there as a clue to where Ilas came from. Maybe not. We'll probably never know."

Max coughed and Vya immediately helped him take another sip of water. The older man's voice strengthened as he went on.

"I translated the writings and as a result, asked your mother to show me her true form. I recognized that form immediately. I remembered a planet I had visited when I was much, much younger."

Max's voice was almost wistful, as if memories of those years were both fond and distant now, as he approached the end of his life.

"Few of the buildings on that planet had survived, and those that did had crumbled over the centuries. Some of the underground caverns were still intact, including many with pictures of the natives and a few artifacts. We didn't know it then, but we've learned since that the people had been destroyed in the last Shadow War, a thousand years ago.

"That was the planet where your mother's people had originated, Vya. They were originally chameleons. They could change their skin color at will, but this," he ran a finger over Vya's cheek, which at that moment showed his true, golden, color, "is the color they were when they didn't actively change it. The inhabitants of that planet moved out into the galaxy and set up colonies across a wide area, including this planet I would guess, although they seem to have abandoned the technology that brought them here. Then something happened, something that made the Vorlons take some of your species--your mother included, apparently--and...store them. And they obviously must have enhanced your people's natural abilities."

Another soft cough, another sip of water, and Max continued, looking up at the rest of us. "Since we left Eriadne we've been searching for others of Ilas' kind. She can't be the only one they saved. There must have been more. Or so we thought. But after fifteen years of searching, we've never found another member of her race. We've found evidence of them on several other worlds, evidence of their colonies, writing, even pictures, but never another living shape-shifter."

With a deep sigh, Max waved his hand at the walls. "And it looks as if this place is no different. From what I can see here, it looks as if these people colonized this planet many thousands of years ago, and lived here peacefully, reverting to a simple Agrarian society. But then it looks as if they, too, were wiped out in the last Shadow War. That mist..." he pointed at the picture I'd been studying earlier. I hadn't seen him even look at it, but he'd obviously taken in most of the images in the short time it had taken him to cross the room.

Sometimes it really irks me when I'm reminded just how smart Max is.

That doesn't mean I have to like him.

"...was probably an original version of the Drakh plague. It seems to have killed all animal life on this planet, leaving only the plants behind."

I looked quizzically across at Luke, who nodded and said, "That would certainly explain what we've found on this island. The lack of bio-diversity would be the inevitable result if all animal life were destroyed. But that..." Luke pointed up at the pictures of the people leaving the city, "would indicate that there were some survivors amongst the sapient life at least. Someone had to make these images."

Max nodded, and pointed to the picture he'd been studying, which now he was seated, I could see clearly. At the center of the picture was a being that looked like the natives, but glowed with light. Even after all the time that had passed, the picture still pulsed with the radiance that shone from within that being. It was surrounded by a small group of the city's inhabitants, who knelt in a worshipping pose around the glowing figure.

"I think that's supposed to represent a Vorlon. They must have intervened when the plague hit. For some reason they wanted to preserve this race. So they changed them, made them more able to adapt to the plague and their environment. Made them into shape-shifters, just like you and your mother." Max smiled fondly at Vya and went on, "In fact, your mother or her ancestors could have been taken from this place, rather than your species' home planet. We'll probably never know."



Luke challenged this. "Unless the species has survived. They might not have become totally extinct on this planet. There could be survivors somewhere."

Max shook his head. "There's no way to know, is there? It would take years to search the whole planet, and from what I hear of the Nabulans, they're not likely to allow such a search anyway. But it raises another interesting question, doesn't it?"

I knew exactly where Max was headed. I gritted my teeth and spat out, "Damned right it does. There's no sign of the Nabulans in those pictures, and no evidence of them ever inhabiting this place. So where did they come from, and if they were here before the plague, how did they survive?"

John interrupted from where he sat, close to the doorway, alert to any approach from the outside. "Actually, there's an even more interesting question." He pointed up at the picture of the mist covered city. "If that is a version of the Drakh plague, did it die with the inhabitants or is it just dormant? One thing is certain, the Excalibur is not leaving this planet until I'm certain that we're not taking a plague with us."

When we finished taking holo-pics of the images on the walls, we started to make our slow way back to the main excavation site. Luke and I helped Max down over the rocks and boulders, while Vya and John cleared a wider path for us. It was easier going on the way down, but I knew that Luke was worried about Max's condition.

We all were.

I could see Vya kept glancing back at his father, then he would turn his attention to hacking back the undergrowth, making sure that the path was wide enough for the three of us who followed to walk abreast.

I don't think Max would have made it back down without the support Luke and I gave him. Even though it was easier, it was still hot and humid in the jungle, and Max's breath came in increasingly short gasps. I looked across at Luke and I could tell that the doctor was worried. About half way back he called a halt and we all rested for a few moments.

Max sat with his back against a tree and his eyes closed, trying desperately to breathe evenly, but failing. Vya, obviously concerned about his father, but also anxious to preserve Max's dignity, distracted us with stories of some of the explorations the family had carried out when he was younger, in their search for survivors of Ilas' race.

When Max's breathing had quieted, we set out again, and finally got back to the main site. The others looked up and waved as we emerged from the jungle, and came to greet us. I noticed that Max straightened his back and waved cheerfully at Ilas and Dureena as they sat in their chairs, surveying the site, with Ilori sitting at their feet. He was obviously determined that the rest of his family should not see the extent of his illness.

John moved quickly to intercept Lily, while I met Deborah and took her in my arms, whispering quickly into her ear, "Max isn't well. Luke is going to take him back into the ship, but he doesn't want Ilas and Dureena to worry. Help me cover for him."

Deborah kissed me gently on the lips then looked at me and smiled, but I could see the worry in her eyes. Aloud she said, "Have you had fun with your expedition? Come and tell us all about it."

With Vya at our side, we moved to where the two elderly women sat, blocking their view of Luke leading Max carefully toward the Angel's Rest. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Angel and Jack move to assist him, and I smiled as I realized that Deborah must have sent a mental request to her sister to help.

G'Tan and No'Kar still stood guard behind the camp chairs where Ilas and Dureena sat and their eyes barely flickered a welcome as they continued to survey the jungle surrounding us, alert to any possibility of intruders.

"Where's Max going? Why isn't he coming to tell us what he's found?" Ilas sounded querulous and started to rise, but Vya moved quickly to reassure his mother.

"Oh, you know what he's like. He gets so involved in what he's found that he forgets about minor things like other people." He gently pushed Ilas back into her seat then dropped to the ground to sit at his mother's feet, next to his sister.

Deborah and I joined them, immediately followed by John and Lily. With the four of us standing between them and the Angel's Rest, there was no way for Ilas and Dureena to see what I had seen as I glanced over my shoulder. Angel had lifted Max into the ship with her telekinesis, and she and Jack had followed Luke inside.

Vya spent the next few minutes regaling his mothers with descriptions of the images we'd seen, distracting them from Max's absence, interrupted and aided by John and me. By the time we'd finished describing everything we'd seen, Jack had rejoined us.

I looked up as he came to stand at Dureena's side and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. Dureena looked up at him and asked, "How's Max?"

The little thief had seen right through our distractions but she'd allowed us to continue. I guess both Ilas and Dureena were well aware of Max's medical condition.

"He's resting. He'd like you and Ilas to join him. He's waiting for you in the main guest cabin." Jack smiled as he delivered the message and helped Dureena to her feet.

Immediately, G'Tan and No'Kar moved to help. The rest of us watched as the two Narns led the elderly women toward the Angel's Rest, with Ilori walking alongside, watching her mothers' progress, ready to help if needed.

I turned to Jack and asked, "How bad is it?"

Jack looked from me to the others and shrugged his shoulders.

"Bad. Luke told me that Max's heart is failing, and for some reason which has something to do with his genes, it's not going to be possible to replace his heart with a fabricated pump. And there's not enough time left for a replacement to be grown. Max only has a couple of months left, maybe less."

Without another word he turned and walked back to the Angel's Rest where I had no doubt that Angel awaited him, ready to give and receive the comfort we all so desperately needed. I held Deborah tightly against my side, and closed my eyes as I felt the wave of love that she projected at me.

Being married to an empath has its benefits.

I looked down at where Vya still sat on the ground and said quietly, "Are you OK? Did you know about this?"

Vya nodded then pushed himself to his feet and his form shimmered and changed. I was faced with the anonymous human I'd met at the Ranger compound on Minbar, and I wondered if this was a persona Vya wore when he wanted to hide who he was and what he was feeling.

The young Ranger said quietly, "If you'll excuse me, I think I'd better start pulling together my report for Entil'zha Ivanova."

With that he left, headed back for the shuttle which remained stationed at one side of the site, his back straight and showing no signs of the anguish he must have been feeling.

John sighed as he stood beside us, then walked away slowly. For a moment, Lily hesitated, torn between her desire to be with him, and her need to be with her youngest sister. Lily and Ilas had

always been close and seeing the youngest of the four sisters ravaged by time must have been hard for the little red-head.

I looked over at where John stood, waiting for Lily to decide what to do, and couldn't help but grin. In the heat of the jungle, John had pulled his shirt from his jeans and unbuttoned it, and now he stood with his shirt open and his chest bare.



Now I generally prefer the female form, but even I have to admit that John has an incredible body. Where he finds the time to work out-and he must work out to keep in that shape-is beyond me. Being a Captain is a full time job, and it doesn't leave much time for gym work. All I used to manage when I was Captain was an occasional bout of solo basketball--that hoop was defective!--and a sporadic work out on a skiing machine. Maybe Lily had her own training regime for John, but whatever he was doing, it was working.

The muscles in John's bare chest and belly rippled, and it took Lily only a few seconds to emit a soft growl and start moving toward her partner, looking like a lithe feline stalking her prey.

John smiled and held out his arms, and I knew exactly what he was doing. He was trying to distract Lily from her worries in the way he knew would be most effective. The two of them moved off into the jungle together.

Deborah gave a soft chuckle at my side and said, "No prizes for guessing what those two will be up to in about ten seconds time. Although I can hardly blame Lily. John really does have the most amazing physique."

I pulled my wife around to face me and narrowed my eyes as I tightened my arms around her. "In case you forgot, you're a married woman. You're not supposed to go around admiring other men's physiques. I know I don't have John's muscles..."

Deborah stopped my word with a kiss that went on for so long it left me breathless. When she finally let me up for air she looked at me in a way that left me in no doubt as to where her admiration was directed.

"Muscles are OK, but I prefer my men long and lean."

"Men?" I grinned and raised one eyebrow.

Deborah grinned back. "Man then. Just the one. As you well know." She grinned again, then her smile faded as she brought us back to the uncomfortable present. "Now tell me what really happened up there."

I decided that I wouldn't mention our fears about a plague. Luke would make sure we were all thoroughly tested, and if there were any traces of a biological agent of some kind, then the scanners we'd developed to cure the Drakh plague would remove all traces and leave us infection free. There was no need to worry Deborah until I was sure we had something to worry about.

Other than the health of her youngest sister, Max and Dureena, which gave us all quite enough to concern us.

I walked my wife slowly back toward the Angel's Rest, my arm tightly around her waist, wondering if there was somewhere I could take her off quietly, just like John had taken Lily. Although in this case it was me who needed the distraction.

A quick glance around the site showed that John hadn't been acting recklessly. A number of the Excalibur's Marines patrolled the boundaries, and if John was willing to take Lily off into the undergrowth, he must be sure that there was no risk of them coming to harm.

Coming, yes. To harm, no.

As we walked I told Deborah about our findings at the other site, and answered her questions. Some of them anyway. I avoided anything which might lead her to the same conclusion that John had reached.

As we approached the ship we came across Harry standing outside with Baby, who was on a long leash. The little dog was running around excitedly, sniffing at everything new and interesting to him. I sometimes forgot that Baby was a beagle, a hound, and a damned good scent dog. That's one of the reasons Harry had him on a leash. If Baby got an interesting scent in his nose, there was nothing that could stop him. He'd be off like the wind.

Harry looked up, a worried expression on his face, as we approached him. I've noticed I have that effect on him. Angel once explained that Harry had just about got to grips with the idea that there was one other man in the universe who looked just like Lucas Buck but wasn't actually evil. It was a bit beyond him to grasp that there might be two such men.

So while Harry had decided that Jack was a good guy, he wasn't so sure about me. There was also the minor issue of him holding me at gun-point the first time we'd met. At the time, I'd promised him retribution for that, and I have a feeling Harry is still waiting for his punishment. I think he can remember that far back.

Deborah was obviously aware of Harry's apprehension, and she tried to reassure him by asking him how Baby was behaving, and stooping to play with the little dog. Baby immediately rolled over on his back with his legs spread wide, waiting for Deborah to tickle his tummy.

For a moment I wondered idly if that tactic might work for me, too.

Hell, getting my tummy tickled by my wife would be worth any indignity in the pose. If I were lucky she wouldn't stop at tickling.

Nor at my tummy.



Before I could get over-excited by the direction my thoughts were taking, I turned my attention to Harry as he explained in his slow and hesitant voice that Baby needed fresh air and a good run. "Miss Angel told me to take care of him so I've brought him outside, but I'm not letting him off the leash. I don't want him to run away and get lost."

I nodded, trying to reassure him. "That's good, Harry. Just what Miss Angel would want."

The big man beamed at me, his ugly face lit up by his happiness at what I had said. I was just about to continue trying to reassure him that I wasn't evil personified when I heard my name being called out behind me.

When we turned around I saw that John and Lily were standing at the edge of the jungle, beckoning us.

I murmured, "That was quick. John must be getting a little premature."

That earned me another thump on the arm. Did I tell you how often my wife beats me up? I keep telling her I bruise easily, but to be honest, I do nothing to discourage her. There's nothing I enjoy more than when she kisses me better.

Deborah pulled on my arm and led me at a brisk pace back across the dig, passing the Excalibur crew who were still diligently clearing away the encrustations of a thousand years of dirt, and recording what they found.

When we reached John and Lily, John pointed into the jungle. "Come and look at this, will you?"

They led Deborah and me into the undergrowth, which was lush and verdant at that point. But soon the vegetation thinned, and we came into a clearing. John pointed at the far side of the open space.

"There's a path. And we didn't make it."

That got my attention. The four of us went to examine the path that threaded through the trees, but I soon called a halt to our investigations.

"OK, we need back-up. We don't know who or what made this path. If it was animals they could be dangerous. And if it was people, they could be dangerous, too."

John nodded and we turned back, dragging our protesting wives with us. Wouldn't you know that they'd want to explore? All John and I needed was a quick exchange of glances to agree that there was no way we were taking Deborah and Lily with us into an unknown situation.

Now don't get me wrong, they can handle themselves, and when all four sisters merge, or even three of them, they make the most formidable weapon I've ever known. But not just the two of them.

Deborah and Lily have no real offensive powers, and I'm not even sure if they could merge on their own. The sisters lost the power to merge for a while after the Vorlon that lived in my wife's head went into hibernation. Long story. Anyway, as Deborah had always been the director of the merge, when the Vorlon retreated, they lost that ability. It was only when Angel's powers grew to the point where she could take over the lead role that they got it back again. They needed Angel, and she was back at the ship, doing whatever she was doing with Jack.

That thought brought a smile to my face. I was sure that Jack would be as interested in our find as John and I were. So I had a valid excuse to interrupt whatever he and Angel were getting up to.

Yeah, I know, I'm a bit of a bastard.

Maybe not just a bit.

If I can't have sex with my wife then I don't see why anyone else should enjoy theirs.

And there was something else I wanted to ask Jack and Angel anyway.

I wanted to borrow their dog.

By the time we'd dragged Angel and Jack out of their quarters, explained what we'd found and what we wanted, explained it again to Luke, who joined us at the tail end of the explanation, then again to Max, Ilas and Dureena, who came out to find what all the fuss was about, my patience was wearing thin.

It didn't help that Angel was being stubborn--nothing new there then--refusing to let me borrow her dog unless she accompanied us.

That was the last thing I wanted. If she came along, then Deborah and Lily would insist on joining us, and next thing we'd be dragging the whole family through the jungle, like some sort of traveling circus. The only thing we were missing was the bearded lady, although I guess Ilas or Vya could have taken care of that one if they'd wanted to.

I gritted my teeth and explained again that this wasn't a picnic in the forest I was trying to organize.

"We have no idea what made that path. All we do know is that a) we've seen nothing yet that is capable of doing such a thing and b) our instruments are useless down here, while Baby's nose works just fine."

Angel gave a proud smile and kissed the top of her dog's head. She was cradling him protectively in her arms, glaring at me suspiciously, as if I planned to kidnap...dognap... her pet.

"If the path was made by any form of animal, Baby should be able to pick up their scent and lead us to them. And by 'us' I mean a group of trained soldiers, armed and ready for anything. Not a family outing."

That didn't go down well, and I could see that Deborah was biting her lip, holding back on whatever she wanted to say. My wife tries not to contradict me in public, but I was sure she'd have plenty to say to me later on in private.

Before I could carry on, John stepped forward and ended the discussion.

"This is not open to debate. This is a military expedition, and civilians don't get to vote. I will listen to reasonable arguments but I've heard enough. I will put together a team of Marines, and I will personally lead that team into the jungle. I will accept certain civilian additions to that team, but only those whom I choose, and on my terms. Ambassador Gideon, Captain Gideon, Ranger Vya, G'Tan and No'Kar are welcome to join us, if they wish. No others."

This was all said in a tone that left no room for argument. The Captain of the Excalibur had spoken and that was the end of the matter. I felt myself smiling with pride at how my protégé had grown and matured. He now showed all the natural authority and competence that I had always known he possessed.

John reinforced my pride as he turned to Angel and said seriously, "Angel, I appreciate your concern about your pet's well-being. If you insist, and if he is willing, I will allow Harry to join us. He can protect Baby. It would be a great help to us if you would allow us to borrow your dog, but if your concern is too great for you to agree to him joining us without your presence, then we'll manage without him."

Angel opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get a word out, John interrupted her. "Yes or no, Angel. No arguments, please. Just a decision."

Sometimes John is a very, very brave man. I'm not sure I would ever have tried using that tone on Angel. She'd have bitten my head off, chewed it up and spat it out again. I could see now that she was struggling with her temper, and I waited for the storm to break. It wasn't a pleasant thought. We'd all seen what Angel could do when she was provoked, but I hoped she'd learned to control herself more since the events that had occurred on Eriadne nearly four years before.

I glanced across to Jack, who was still smiling at John's assertion of authority. I saw him lean over to whisper something in Angel's ear. Whatever he said, it seemed to calm Angel. She took a deep breath and stooped to place Baby on the floor of the cargo bay, which was where we had gathered.

"Baby can go with you, if... and this is non-negotiable, Captain," there was a lot of emphasis on that title, "...IF Harry, Jack, G'Tan and No'Kar go, too. I know they'll look after him."

The small dog moved to lean against Jack's leg and he looked up at his master adoringly, his head to one side and his tongue lolling out of his mouth. I could swear Baby knew he was being talked about, and he knew where he wanted to be. At his master's feet.

Once I'd got over being miffed that Angel didn't feel that I was necessary to protect her pet, I listened as John gave his orders.

"We're losing the afternoon light now, so we'll start the search in the morning." He turned to Jack and Angel, saying, "If you want to stay down here tonight, I'll leave a squad of guards with you."

Luke, Lily and I will go back up to the Excalibur. I'll leave the rest of you to decide if you want to come back up on one of the shuttles or stay here on the Angel's Rest."

Holding out a hand to each of his partners, John pulled them both close to his side, nodded at the rest of us, and left the cargo bay.

There was a few seconds of silence after John, Lily and Luke left, eventually filled by G'Tan's bass rumble.

"He's come a long way, hasn't he?"

I turned and grinned at the Narn. "And he'll go further yet. I'll give you good odds that he'll be the first teep General in Earthforce. Anyone want to bet against him?"

The others declined, as I suspected they might. In this case I was betting on a sure thing.

We sorted ourselves out quickly; Deborah and I decided to go back to the Excalibur, while Max, Ilas and Dureena wanted to stay on the Angel's Rest. Jack and Angel called John to tell them they were taking him up on his offer to leave a guard around the ship, as they planned to spend the night on the island.

Why did Deborah and I go back to the Excalibur?

Think about it. On the Angel's Rest we'd get the second best guest quarters (Max, Ilas and Dureena had nabbed the biggest cabin) which were unshielded. Back on the Excalibur, we had our old quarters, with our big bed, and shielding that let us fornicate like fuck-happy bunnies with no one else the wiser.

In case you hadn't noticed, my wife and I like to fuck.

A lot.

26th May 2284

The next morning we were back down on the southern island bright and early. Luke had done a discrete check on everyone with a medical scanner and confirmed that none of us had acquired any nasty viruses during our stay. If there had been a plague on the planet, it seemed dead or at least dormant.

We assembled outside the Angel's Rest, with our wives standing by to wish us luck. I could see that Angel was still unhappy about letting her husband and her pet go off without her, but Jack seemed to be quite capable of calming her without my help--unfortunately--so I turned my attention to my own wife, who needed a little calming, too.

Deborah was pouting a little at the prospect of being left behind. Do you have any idea how sexy she looks when she does that? Her mouth was made for pouting, just as it was made for doing other things, which I won't go into now or I'll get distracted.

So Deborah pouted, and I kissed those luscious lips whispering to her that everything would be fine. "Just a little stroll through the woods. Nothing to worry about."

Her golden eyes sparkled with green as she whispered back, "If it's just a little stroll, then there's no reason why I shouldn't come with you, is there?" I was about to answer her when she sighed and went on, "I know, you don't have to tell me again. Captain's orders."

She gave me a worried little smile and said softly, "Just take care of yourself. Don't be a hero. I want you back in working order, OK?" Placing her hands against my chest and rubbing gently, Deborah gave me a lascivious leer. "You've got a lot more wear in you yet, and I have plans for what I want to do with you before I trade you in for a younger model."

I laughed out loud at that. While Deborah and I had been through a lot, and our marriage had experienced a few rocky patches, we'd reached a stage in our lives where we knew that only one thing would ever part us. And I had no intention of dying just then.

With one final kiss, and a fond farewell pat of my wife's butt, I turned and joined the others.

John had six of the Excalibur's Marines ready to go. Vya and Harry stood with them with Baby on a short leash. Angel knelt at Harry's feet, fondling her dog's ears, looking up at her friend and smiling. She rose quickly as we joined them, turning to glare at John, then at the rest of us.

"You'd better bring Baby back safe and sound or don't come back at all!"

With that she stormed off toward the ship, leaving Jack looking a little sheepish. He grinned at the assembled party and said, "You heard her. We'd better make sure Baby comes back without a mark on him."

John called us to order and we set off across the site, quickly reaching the edge of the jungle. I turned to look back as we entered the forest, and saw that Deborah, Lily and Angel stood together at the bottom of the ship's ramp, holding hands. I lifted my hand to wave at them, but got no response. As I turned back to follow the others, I wondered what they were up to, then pushed the thought aside, focusing on the task before us.

We had path makers to track.

Baby led Harry and the rest of us through the jungle, his nose pressed to the ground, his tail wagging frantically behind him. We could all see that the dog was having tremendous fun and was thoroughly enjoying being out in the open air. Harry hung onto Baby's leash as if his life depended on it, which it probably did.

I didn't give good odds of any of us surviving long if we returned to Angel without her beloved pet.



Three of the Excalibur's Marines walked alongside Harry, PPG rifles at the ready. Jack, John, Vya, G'Tan, No'Kar and I walked in a group a few feet behind, with another group of Marines following, equally alert. The two Narns were also armed to the teeth and looking around, ready for anything.

As on the previous day, the silence and heat in the jungle were oppressive. The path wound through the undergrowth, never letting us see more than a few meters ahead of us.

John had insisted on us all wearing flak jackets, and mine was rubbing under the armpits. I slid a finger under the edge, trying to ease it a little, but it continued to chafe, making me hot and irritable. A while before I'd started grumbling about the discomfort and how wearing the damned thing was probably unnecessary, which had earned me a look from John that had shut me up at once.

It was a look that said, "Shut it, Matthew, or I'll get one of my Marines to gag you."

I was so proud of John for that look I almost forgot to be annoyed. The only good thing was that I could see Jack was suffering similarly from the chaffing, and somehow that made it easier to bear. Well, they say misery loves company.

After an hour of silent marching, the path narrowed, winding through a particularly dense patch of undergrowth. Baby suddenly came to a halt. His head went up and he started to sniff the air. At the same time, his tail stopped wagging and dropped between his legs. The little dog cocked his head to one side, then turned and looked anxiously from Harry to Jack and back.

Then everything happened at once. Baby dived between Jack's legs, and Harry dived after him, sweeping Jack off his feet. As they went down in a tangle, with Baby's leash effectively tying them all together, the echoes of Baby's barking, Jack's cursing, and Harry's whimpers all sounded out through the jungle together making the most god-awful and utterly inhuman noise you've ever heard.

Before any of the rest of us could even move to help the two men and a dog untangle themselves, strange whistling noises sounded through the trees. I paused, trying to make sense of the sound, then felt a thud in my chest. I looked down to see a long, thin object sticking out of the middle of my flak jacket.

I quickly pulled out the evil looking dart, which fortunately had stopped short of penetrating the flak jacket's padding, then all hell broke loose. In this case hell is defined as PPG shots, arrows and darts. I dived toward Jack and Harry with only one thought in my head. If I returned to the ship without Angel's husband and dog... well, the consequences would be dire.

I found myself pinning Jack down, sheltering his body with mine, while he did the same for Harry, and underneath the pile was one small dog. While there was no way any of the varied and numerous missiles flying over our heads could possibly hit Baby, I did wonder whether he just might get squashed flat by the weight of his protectors.

Returning a flat puppy to his mistress didn't seem like that good an idea either, so I growled into Jack's ear--I think it was Jack's...it was either his or Harry's as it wasn't long and furry, so it

couldn't have been Baby's--"Stay with Harry. I'm going to help the others."

The head to which the ear was attached nodded, almost taking out my front teeth, so I rolled off the tangle of men and dog, pulling out my PPG and firing into the jungle where the missiles seemed to be coming from.

I could see that Vya, G'Tan and No'Kar had taken a defensive crouch, back to back, and were also firing into the trees, while the Marines had gathered around us all, trying to protect us from the incoming fire.

With a scream, one of them went down with an arrow in his neck. John leaped out of the circle they'd formed around us, yelling, "Man down! Medic!"

Before anyone could respond to his call, another voice sounded out from the trees.

"Cease fire! That's English!"

Something about the voice was familiar, but I kept my PPG at the ready as the missiles flying at our group ceased, and we reformed into a defensive circle around our fallen comrade and the dog. Never has one puppy been quite so well protected. Baby had two Narns, two Captains, a Ranger, an Ambassador and a bodyguard all looking out for his well-being.

Not that we were worried about Angel's reaction if her dog got hurt.

No, not worried at all.

While one of the Marines tended to the wounded man, the rest of us had weapons raised as the trees around us rustled. The figure that emerged from the greenery had long, black hair, streaked with grey, tied back into a pony tail, and a straggly beard. His clothes were worn and patched in places, but clean enough for me to recognize them at once as a familiar uniform.

The man--for man it was; entirely human by the looks of it--grinned at us as he emerged.

"Well, it certainly took you long enough to find us! I've kept telling everyone you'd come, but to be honest, I think the rest of my crew was beginning to lose hope. Not me, of course. I'm always optimistic. Got to look on the bright side, that's what I say. Can't afford to get all gloomy and despondent. Before you know it, you're down in the dumps, and there's just no point in getting up in the mornings, is there?"

"So I kept telling the chaps, 'Oh no, don't you worry, someone will come looking for us. They'll find us in the end.' And it looks like I was right, doesn't it? Here you are, and it's really good to see you again, Matthew, although I have to say that the addition of another Matthew is a bit confusing. Or is this the alternative version of you that was running around the galaxy back when I was in circulation, thinking that no one had noticed him? But we kept track you know. The Rangers that is. We didn't tell the Minbari Warriors of..."

"Marcus, shut up for a minute, will you?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Standing in front of me was Marcus Cole, the Ranger who my wife and her sisters had 'resurrected' on Babylon 5. The Ranger who had married Susan Ivanova, and who had gone missing five years before. Here he was, large as life and twice as loud.

Irrepressible as ever, Marcus cocked his head on one side and grinned at me. "Was I rambling? Probably was. It's been a long time since I've had a chance to have a good natter with humans, you know. The others on my White Star are all Minbari and although they're good chaps, they're not that talkative. So I've missed having a good chinwag. But let's not just stand here in the middle of the forest, passing the time of day. That Marine of yours looks in need of a little more first aid."

Marcus gestured at the wounded man, his face falling into more sober lines. "Sorry about that. We really had no idea who was tracking us, and when we heard those dreadful noises...what was that, by the way? Never mind, tell me later. Bring him along and I'm sure we can fix him up. Come along to our camp and have a nice cup of tea. Well, I call it tea, but it isn't really, you know. But it's wet and warm, and needs must, eh?"

As Marcus wittered on, other forms emerged from the jungle. There were four Minbari, wearing Ranger uniforms like Marcus, and like his they were clean but tattered and patched. Behind them came four other beings.

I heard a small gasp from my side as these four emerged, and looked around to see that Vya was standing with his mouth wide open. He had good reason. The four humanoids all had the same golden skin as his, but their eyes had red irises, with slits for pupils, just like Ilas in her natural form.

Not only had we found our wandering Ranger, but we'd found survivors of Ilas and Vya's race.

Once I'd checked that Baby, Harry and Jack were all unharmed, I started to grin. It was going to be fun telling Marcus that his wife was in a ship in orbit above us. With any luck the surprise might actually leave him speechless.

OK, I can dream, can't I?

Fortunately for Marine Klinga, it turned out we were only a few hundred meters from Marcus' camp. No'Kar had got the bleeding from the wound in Klinga's neck under control while we'd talked, and G'Tan now stooped to lift the wounded Marine easily into his arms. There are definite advantages to having Narns around, and I still wasn't sure why John didn't have any among his Marines.

As we turned to make our way down the last small stretch of path, we heard a scuffling noise ahead of us, followed by a loud squeak. Baby's head went up and his tail started wagging, as he lunged on his leash and struggled to drag Harry down the path.

I pulled out my PPG again, and saw John and Vya do the same, while the Marines came to full alert, and the shape-shifters on Marcus' team melted back into the undergrowth, no doubt making their own way back to the source of the noise.

To my surprise, Jack laughed softly, saying, "Don't worry. I know exactly what that is."

He strode confidently down the path, leaving the rest of us looking at each other. I shrugged, holstered my PPG again, and followed, with Baby right on my heels, still straining at his leash, and wagging his tail frantically. I decided if Jack and Baby weren't worried, then why should I be?

I was right on Jack's heels as he entered a clearing in the forest and started to laugh. I might have joined him, but I was too dumbfounded by the sight that met my eyes to make any noise at all. I just stopped dead on the path with my mouth open, causing John and Vya to bump into me from behind.

I wasn't sure whether to be mad, stunned or amused as I watched Jack move into the center of the clearing toward the figure that sat on the ground, dusting herself off. She was surrounded by shape-shifters wielding spears, but Marcus called out to them in a language I hadn't heard before, and they backed off and let Jack through. He reached down a hand to help the recumbent figure to her feet and grinned as he said, "You really have to work on that landing, Angelique."

All the pieces started to click into place as I watched Angel pull herself up with Jack's help.

Now I understood what the sisters had been doing when we left the Angel's Rest. Deborah had told me that when she had merged with her sisters back on Eriadne four years before, they'd been able to cast their joint consciousness out into the universe. She hadn't retained much memory of what they had seen, as Angel now controlled the merge, but Deborah had told me that once the sisters joined minds, they could see anywhere they wanted to see.

Obviously, this time, what Angel had wanted to see had been her husband and pet.

I won't claim to know which was more important to her.

She must have used the merge to monitor our progress through the jungle, and had seen our reunion with Marcus Cole.

What Angel has done next still leaves me gaping in astonishment. She had teleported herself to the clearing, so she was waiting for us when we arrived. I found out later that since she had first discovered this power, also on Eriadne at the time of her wedding, she'd been practicing her skills. Jack knew all about it and while he'd forbidden her to even try jumping around inside their ship-too much risk that she could accidentally overshoot and find herself outside in a vacuum-he'd encouraged her to practice whenever they were planet-side.

That explained what Jack had whispered to Angel the previous day and why she'd calmed down so quickly. He'd reminded her that she could join us any time she liked. So like a guardian Angel, she'd watched over us, then decided to jump ahead of us. The only slight problem was that she hadn't yet refined the art of making a stationary landing. She tended to come in sideways, then tumble head over heels into a heap.

That's exactly what she'd done in the clearing, and nearly got herself speared by the shape-shifters Marcus had left guarding the camp.

Before anyone could speak, Angel gave Jack a quick kiss on the cheek and then rounded on Marcus Cole.

I won't even attempt to repeat all the names she called him. All I can say is that she must have been picking up tips from my wife, who has a very extensive vocabulary. Angel's cursing was creative and wide-ranging as she marched up to Marcus, lifted herself up until her nose was on a level with his-and let me tell you how weird that looked, with Angel's feet hovering several centimeters off the ground-and yelled.

"Where the hell have you been? How dare you just disappear like that? Don't you know how worried we've all been? Do you think we brought you back to life so you could just swan off and disappear? What sort of gratitude is that? And how do you think poor Susan felt? She was devastated, Marcus, DEVASTATED!"

The last word was blasted at Marcus with such force he actually swayed backwards, his face frozen with shock at the diatribe being launched at him. For a moment I almost felt sorry for him, then I remembered a certain stripper, a Drazi and a trained monkey, and I decided he deserved it all.

Angel continued to berate him, occasionally shifting into other languages, including Narn and Drazi-Drazi swearwords are particularly satisfying-casting aspersions on Marcus' birth and ancestry back to the tenth generation.

I think it was a reference to how his grandmother must have mated with Spoo that finally did it. Marcus started to laugh, which set the rest of us off, which sent Angel into further paroxysms of fury.

"If you lot don't stop laughing you'll find Marcus' Denn'bok inserted somewhere you won't like!"

That shut us all up and I decided it was time to act like the diplomat I sometimes pretended to be.



"Angel, we need your help. Klinga is hurt." I knew that would distract her. Angel had always been a healer first and foremost.

She turned to where G'Tan cradled Klinga gently in his arms, giving Marcus one last glare that should have turned him to stone, then started talking softly to No'Kar and G'Tan, while calling for the first aid kits all the Marines carried. Baby and Harry moved over to join them, giving the rest of us chance to catch our breath and start interrogating the stranded Rangers.

Marcus sobered quickly when he saw Angel going to work on Klinga, saying, "Sometime, you're going to have to explain to me how she did that, and what she's doing here. But not now. For now, it would be better if I told you how we got here." Marcus then gave us a surprisingly concise and coherent description of the events leading to his ship's crash landing on Nabula.

"We were following up some reports of missing ships in this area. A couple of Drazi traders had limped home, claiming that they'd been attacked by something they'd never seen before. It was just a routine patrol really, but we were on full alert anyway. I've always been wary of ships no one has ever seen before. They're rarely friendly, in my experience." The Ranger gave a pained sigh,

expressing clearly his disappointment that the universe wasn't a friendlier place. Then he perked up again as he remembered that if it were, it would be a lot less fun.

"We'd just entered orbit around this planet, trying to scan the surface, when something came up at us, and nearly blew us out of the sky. I didn't think there was a weapon short of the Excalibur's main gun that could do that in one shot, but this thing did it. It damaged our engines and knocked us out of orbit. Before we could make any repairs, we started to spiral in, completely out of control. Frankly, if Lanveri here..." he pointed to one of the female Minbari, "...hadn't been such a superb pilot, we would have burned up on entering the atmosphere."

The Minbari Ranger bowed her head in acknowledgment of the compliment, but made no attempt to interrupt Marcus. No one did. I guess after five years living on this island with him they'd learned how useless that was.

"Lanveri somehow kept us flying, although it was more of a barely controlled fall than a flight, but she kept us in the air long enough for the rest of us to get some power back to the engines. We were just about to crash on the equatorial continent north of here when Lanveri was able to pull us up and get us a few hundred clicks further south. It took everything the ship had left to land safely, and we barely got out with some basic supplies, when the engines exploded, destroying the ship completely. So here we are, five years on, waiting for our rescuers. Took you long enough."

Marcus grinned at us, and I shook my head. He really was irrepressible.

John stepped forward, taking charge again. "And can you tell us who your friends are? Their mental patterns are unlike anything I've come across before."

That sent my eyebrows up to my hairline. John must have done a light scan to check for the aliens' intentions. If they'd been feeling any aggression, John would have picked it up. The fact that he stood there, relaxed, with his PPG holstered, made me feel secure that the shape-shifters didn't plan on attacking us, but I was still surprised that he'd carried out a scan in those circumstances. John had come a long way from the repressed telepath I'd insisted on having join my crew all those years before. Now he was willing to use his powers, even when it involved bending the rules, to ensure the safety of his people.

Marcus launched into another long explanation.

Soon after they'd landed, the shape-shifters had emerged from the jungle, primitively armed, but not actively hostile. Communication had been difficult at first, but the Minbari are renowned for their linguistic skills, and soon the Rangers and the shape-shifters had established a peaceful coexistence.

"They're the last remnants of a race that was pretty much wiped out in the last Shadow War. They still have stories about how their people came to this planet many thousand years ago, from another place. At that time, the only thing they could change about themselves was their skin. Then a thousand years ago, a plague fell on this planet.

"They nearly all died, but they say a being of light came to some of them and changed them. It made them stronger, allowing them to resist the plague and giving them the ability to shift their

forms."

Vya could no longer contain himself at that. He stepped forward, reaching his arm out slowly to the group of shape-shifters who stood watching us guardedly. He smiled carefully, then started to change. Up to that point, he'd been wearing his anonymous human form, but now his hair and skin changed color, and his shape altered subtly, becoming thicker and stockier.

The shape-shifters opened their eyes wide in amazement as they realized that one of their own kind was among the strangers who had appeared in their camp. They started talking softly among themselves, reaching out to touch Vya's hands and face, gently, but with increasing confidence as he smiled and didn't move.

He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of us as we stood watching and his grin widened. "We've never known when my species developed the ability to change form. Now we know where and when the Vorlons learned how to adapt and change us. They did it to save the survivors. I wonder if they took my mother from this place. Or did she come from the home planet and have her genes altered in the same way as these people? I guess we'll never know, as they could have kept her in stasis for hundreds of years, but at least we've found some of our own kind at last."

John smiled at the Ranger's obvious excitement, then turned to Marcus asking, "How many of them are left? And how do they survive?"

Marcus sighed and his face fell. "There are only sixty-five of them alive now. Their infant mortality rate is appalling, as the plants that survived the plague don't give them all the nutrients they need. Their numbers have been dwindling, generation after generation. Too much inbreeding and too much malnutrition have almost forced them to extinction. And now the Vorlons aren't around to save them. I'm afraid they're a dying race."

Vya whipped his head round and glared at Marcus. "No! We can't let that happen. If we can get them back to the ISA, I'm sure we can help them. Find them a better place to live. Give them a fighting chance."

I stepped forward and intervened, trying to calm Vya. "We can try, Vya. It wouldn't be the first time the ISA had evacuated a race to save them." I was never likely to forget Inesbitrin, where I'd nearly died on my last mission as Captain of the Excalibur. The population there had been much larger, but we'd still found them a new home suitable for their needs.

Vya calmed and nodded. "I will speak to the Entil'zha. She will understand and support me."

Marcus started grinning again. "Perfect! And tell me, how is Deleenn? She's still young for a Minbari, so I assume she's well?"

I chewed my lip for a moment, struggling to suppress the sheer malicious pleasure I was feeling. I was so going to enjoy imparting the next bit of news to Marcus Cole.

"Deleenn is fine. But she's not Entil'zha any more. You've got a new boss."

Marcus looked amazed. "Really? What could possibly have happened to make Deleenn give up her role? And who would she trust to take over from her?"

OK, so I'm a bad person. I'll probably burn in hell for my wickedness, but sometimes it's worth it. Sometimes, life presents you with an opportunity that just can't be passed by.

I grinned at Marcus and said, "I'll explain why Deleenn changed jobs later, but for now you just need to know who the new Entil'zha is."

Marcus looked at me curiously, and I could see John trying to suppress a grin as he stood next to me.

"So who is it? Come on Matthew, don't keep me in suspense. Is it one of the Minbari? Vya said 'she' and there were a number of Minbari females who taught at the Rangers' Training Camp, but I can't think of any of them who would have been really suitable for the job. I mean, it's pretty unique position. Demands a lot of respect. Can't be just any old Ranger."

I grinned even wider. I probably looked like the Cheshire cat. "Not any old Ranger. Actually, not a Ranger at all. As you said, Deleenn needed someone she trusted implicitly to take over from her. There was only one person who Deleenn respected and trusted that much."

Marcus frowned at me, impatient for me to continue, but I made him wait a long minute while I savored the moment.

"Brace yourself, Marcus. Your new boss is your wife."

That little snippet of news left Marcus so dumbstruck, he actually stayed quiet long enough for us to get ourselves organized. Have you ever seen a Ranger look as if he's been hit in the face with a dead codfish? If I'd had a camera with me, I could show you how it looks.

While Marcus was still opening and closing his mouth soundlessly-come to think of it, he looked a bit like a codfish himself just then-John gave brisk orders.

Vya joined the small group of shape-shifters and two of the Minbari, who would go back to the main shape-shifter settlement and start preparing them for possible evacuation. The Minbari would act as translators, and they agreed that it was more likely the shape-shifters would believe and trust one of their own kind, and be willing to leave their world for a better future at his behest.

I just kept my fingers crossed that Vya's faith in Ivanova agreeing to the evacuation would be justified. I thought at first that Vya was showing how much he trusted me and John, in that he was willing to leave it to us to persuade Ivanova that evacuating these people was the right thing to do. Then I thought about it again and decided that Vya was relying on Marcus Cole. If Ivanova's husband, newly returned from the dead-again-asked her, she probably couldn't refuse him anything.

John turned to Angel, who was now standing with Jack and Harry, cradling Baby in her arms, and smiled gently.

"Angel, could you contact your sisters and let them know we're coming back? This needs careful discussion before we act, and I don't want to trust this to communications that may be intercepted by the Nabulans. Get the shuttles ready for departure. We're going back to the Excalibur."

Angel nodded and closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and smiled. "Demon's getting things organized. Lily sends her love, and Ilas is so excited she's almost incoherent, but she says that Vya should be careful."

Vya gave a little snort of laughter at his mother's warning, saying, "She says that all the time. I keep telling her that Rangers are always careful."

With that, he turned and followed the other shape-shifters and Rangers into the jungle.

Marcus and the remaining Rangers quickly made up a makeshift stretcher to carry Klinga, and soon we were ready to make our way back to camp. Just as we were about to start out, Angel called out to John.

"Captain." That meant it was official, otherwise Angel would have called him John.

John turned and looked at the raven-haired beauty, who stood sheltered by her husband's protective arm, cuddling her small dog.

"Lily just contacted me. She says that Max, Dureena and Ilas are refusing to leave the dig site. Ilas wants to see her people, while Max says he hasn't finished investigating. Dureena won't go back to the ship without the others. Lily wants to know what you want to do about them."

I could hear John muttering under his breath something about airlocks. I think I must have been a bad influence on him. The John Matheson I'd taken under my wing many years before would never have considered pushing people out of airlocks. I felt a glow of pride rush over me at that thought. Every commander should have murderous tendencies in their soul and larceny in their heart, or they're just not doing the job right.

John took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. "Tell her to get everyone else organized for departure. I'll deal with the Eilerson ménage when I get back to the site."

I grinned, mentally wishing him luck. I'd never had much success getting Max and Dureena to follow orders. I didn't see why John should be any more successful.

Angel hesitated for a moment, then said, "If you like, I could jump us both back there. I was going to take Baby back with me, but if Jack and Harry take care of him, I could manage one passenger."

John blinked a couple of times, and I swear he swallowed convulsively. I'm not sure I'd have been willing to take Angel up on the offer of a quick teleport back to base, and John looked equally hesitant.

Before he could say anything, Angel gave a mischievous smile and said, "Don't worry, I'll get you back in one piece. Lily would kill me if I lost any bits of you on the way."

She passed Baby over to Harry, turned to give Jack a brief but passionate kiss, then held her hand out to John.

The brave Captain of the Excalibur swallowed again, then turned to me and said, "Get everyone back to the dig site as fast as you can. The shuttles will be ready to leave as soon as you get there."



I gave him a sloppy salute, grinning as I watched him gingerly reach out and take Angel's outstretched hand. A second later, they were both gone. There were no sound effects, no bright lights, just one second they were there, then they weren't.

Jack let out a soft snort of laughter and said, "I hope she gets her landing better this time, or John's going to have some interesting bruises for Lily to kiss and for Luke to fix."

By the time we all got back to the dig, John had got everything sorted out. He'd agreed to allow Max and Dureena to stay and carry on the site investigation, but Ilas had reluctantly consented to returning with her sisters to the Excalibur. Deborah told me later that Ilas had only come around when John had pointed out to her the importance of having a friendly face waiting to greet the evacuated shape-shifters when they arrived on the Excalibur.

That assumed Ivanova would agree to their evacuation of course, but none of us were in much doubt of that.

John left the squad of Marines to guard Max and Dureena at the site, and a shuttle to take them back to the Excalibur when the final recall came, with the best pilot he had: Trace Miller. He also left a couple of Starfuries to ride shotgun, just in case.

The rest of us, including Marcus and his Rangers, piled onto the remaining shuttles and the Angel's Rest, and headed back to the Excalibur, doing our usual south polar detour, to stay off the Nabulans' sensor screens.

I sat next to Marcus on the bridge of the Angel's Rest and watched him fidget. He'd just about recovered from the kisses and hugs he'd got from Lily when we'd arrived back at the camp. The fiery redhead may be small, but she packs one hell of a punch when she gives a really passionate kiss. Having full sexual intercourse with some women is less intimate and overwhelming than being kissed by Lily, and Marcus had been left reeling in shock.

Fortunately, for the sake of the Ranger's continued survival, Deborah's welcome had been a little more restrained; she'd given him a gentle peck on the cheek and admonished him quietly for giving us all such a fright by going missing for so long. Marcus had hung his head and apologized profusely, saying he didn't mean to do it.

I don't know how she does it, but somehow Deborah can reduce a man to a quivering lump of Jell-o with a few soft words, far more effectively than when she lets rip and yells. I think it's the disappointment in her eyes. Just one look at my wife, and every man wants to be a hero.

When she'd turned and looked at me, the passion in her eyes made it clear to me that I was her hero and always would be. Do you have any idea how good that makes me feel? By the time she'd finished kissing me passionately, welcoming me back in her inimitable way, I was grinning like an idiot and felt ten meters tall.

What can I say? Deborah is good for me.

Of course, that didn't stop her cutting me back down to size again by giving me an evil grin and saying, "I told you he wasn't dead."

When will I learn not to give my wife the chance to say "I told you so."? Gloating is one of her less attractive traits, and I really shouldn't encourage her, but I have to admit that when she gets like that she makes me laugh.

So I'd roared with laughter, slapped Deborah's butt fondly, and steered her up the ramp of the Angel's Rest.

Marcus continued to fidget nervously through the uneventful trip back up to the Excalibur. I think it was finally beginning to sink in that he was going to see his wife again after five long years apart, and he was getting increasingly nervous about the reception he'd get.

I heard him muttering under his breath, over and over again.

"Ni sen vlani en elis vidron. Ni sen vlani en elis vidron. Ni sen vlani en elis vidron."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. I'd learned enough Minbari over the years to be able to understand the words.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

I guess it was a start, but something told me that Ivanova was going to need a lot more than being told she was beautiful before she forgave him.

I was wrong. Completely and utterly wrong. But then again, I'm not sure Ivanova would have been so forgiving if she hadn't been forewarned.

I must admit I'd forgotten the little snippet of information that Ivanova had given Deborah and me on Minbar. I'd forgotten that she was a low level telepath. Apparently she was only a T1 or 2, barely more than latent, but that little bit of talent had been enough for John to make contact with her as we approached the Excalibur, mentally briefing her on what we'd found below.

So Ivanova was waiting, in her full Ranger One uniform, as the Angel's Rest came in to land inside the Excalibur. Susan's hair was pulled back off her face, and she looked both beautiful and severe as she watched the cargo bay doors opening to allow us to emerge.



I could see her eyes shifting from person to person as she sought out the only face in which she had any real interest, but that was the only sign of her distraction. Otherwise, she held herself proud and tall, giving no sign of the emotion she must have been feeling.

Marcus hung back a little, suddenly hesitant, and obviously concerned about the reception he was going to receive. This allowed the rest of us to line up along the wall of the landing bay, an eager audience for what was to come.

I glanced from John and Luke, who stood with their arms around Lily, to Jack, who held Angel close to his side, to G'Tan and No'Kar, who both had wide grins spread across their broad faces, and finally to Deborah, who stood beside me, her lips curving into a gentle smile. Then I turned back to enjoy the show.

The Rangers emerged from the Angel's Rest one by one, and each paused in front of Ivanova, giving her a respectful bow and Minbari salute, before moving to one side and awaiting orders.

Marcus was the last to emerge from the ship, looking much neater and tidier than when we'd first come across him on the planet below. Soon after the Angel's Rest had taken off, with Jack in the pilot's chair, Angel had dragged Marcus off the bridge telling him he needed a shave and hair cut. She had got him back to his seat, hair and beard trimmed and the bits in between neatly shaved, well before the Excalibur had given us permission to dock.

So now Marcus looked much as he had done when we had first met, with the addition of a few gray streaks in his hair. Well, we all have those, don't we? Marcus' back was straight and his face frozen into an expressionless mask as he strode forward and stood at attention in front of his leader and wife.

Giving Ivanova the same bow and salute as his crew had given, I heard him murmur, "Entil'Zha. My apologies for being a little late with my report, but I was unavoidably detained." All this time, Marcus had kept his eyes fixed firmly on the floor, and Ivanova hadn't moved a muscle.

Then Marcus lifted his eyes to his wife's face, and he broke into the widest grin I've ever seen as he said softly, "Ni sen vlani en elis vidron."

Ivanova's composure broke. She flung herself into Marcus' arms, and their kiss went on so long that I'm amazed they didn't suffocate.

The humans watching started to cheer, and after a slightly startled pause, the Minbari and Narns joined in. I learned that Narns can produce a particularly loud and piercing whistle when they use their fingers and teeth in unison, something they'd apparently learned from humans and embellished in their own inimitable way.

I don't think Susan and Marcus heard any of it. They were so engrossed in each other, a marching band of naked Pak'ma'ra could have made their way through that landing bay playing the Earthforce hymn, and they wouldn't have noticed a thing.

Ain't love grand?

Before Ivanova got a chance to tear strips off Marcus in private, she reverted to her professional persona. Finally releasing her Ranger husband from a passionate embrace, Susan straightened her uniform, smoothed down her hair-Marcus had ruffled it a little when he held her, something which I had no doubt would be added to the long, long list of things he would be told off about later-and became all business again as she nodded at Marcus, saying "Ranger Cole. Please join me in the conference room for debriefing."

I suspected a more extensive and intimate 'debriefing' would take place later, but I pushed such lascivious thoughts from my mind, telling myself to stop sniggering like a schoolboy.

Turning to John, Ivanova said, "With your permission, Captain?"

It was a nice courtesy, as she was John's commanding officer on this mission. As such, she had ultimate authority over him, and could have given him a direct order.

John nodded his agreement and appreciation, then led the way out of the landing bay, pausing only to kiss Lily briefly.

Ivanova beckoned Jack, Luke and me to join her, so I kissed Deborah quickly, promising to bring her up to date on what was planned later. If I hadn't, she would probably have found a way to eavesdrop.

And she says that I'm nosy!

By the time I got back to our quarters it was late and Deborah was in bed. I couldn't help but smile as I paused in the doorway to our bedroom and looked at my wife, who was sitting up in bed, reading.

Deborah now needed reading glasses for close work, one of the only signs of aging she showed. She had a pair of small, half-moon spectacles perched on the end of her nose, and she glanced up at me over the top of them, looking like a stern schoolmistress--a very sexy school-mistress--about to admonish an erring pupil.

If I were lucky, she might get her little whip out later, but that's another story.

For the moment, I moved across the room, planted a kiss on the end of her nose, then went into the bathroom and got ready for bed, talking as I stripped, showered and cleaned my teeth, bringing Deborah up to date on our plans.

At our meeting in the conference room, Marcus has given a rather more detailed report on how his White Star had been shot down, and what he had learned from the shape-shifter inhabitants on the southern island during his five year sojourn there.

By the time he had finished speaking, our minds were pretty much made up. The Nabulans were stringing us along and weren't to be trusted. And it was quite probably them who had been attacking our shipping all along. The only question was what were we going to do about it?

We narrowed it down to three options:

We could pack up our bags and leave, but that wouldn't solve anything. We'd still have an enemy in this sector, and we were no further forward with knowing for certain who it was, where it came from, and most importantly, whether we could destroy it, than we had been when we'd arrived nearly two weeks before.

We could attack the Nabulans, but that didn't sit comfortably with anyone. They may have been lying through their pointy teeth, but they hadn't actually shown any direct aggression to us that we could be sure of. The ISA didn't start wars without very good reason, and the Nabulans hadn't given us one. Yet.

If Marcus and his crew had been certain of the source of the weapon that shot them down, it might have been different. But they couldn't be sure where on the planet the beam had come from, so we couldn't lay the blame squarely on the Nabulans.

Which left the last, and to my mind, most unpalatable option. We were going to have to go down there and give them one last chance to come clean.

I hated that option for a number of reasons, and not just because I'd have to endure another meeting with the smelly, lying bastards. Have I mentioned before that they all have dreadful halitosis? Or did I forget that last insult to our senses, when the list of ways in which I disliked this species had already gotten so long?

No, it wasn't the smell or the sound of their voices that gave me the most misgivings. It was the fact that I was going to have to give the bastards a fair shot at killing me. We decided the only way we could progress the discussions was to confront them with our findings, and with Marcus' story.

To be fair to Marcus, he did volunteer to come down with us, but Ivanova stomped on that idea so fast it never got chance to draw breath, never mind get a full airing. She'd just got her Ranger back, and there was no way she was going to let him go and get himself killed again.

John wanted to go with me, but Ivanova vetoed that too, saying she needed him in command of the Excalibur, just in case it came to a fight. I'd agreed vehemently. Whatever happened to me, I wanted John, Luke and Lily safe. They were my children's guardians, should Deborah and I ever be unable to look after them.

By the time I got through all that part of the story, I'd finished my bedtime preparations, and I moved back into the bedroom. Deborah still sat up in bed, the sheets pulled up over her breasts-that was something I planned to change very soon-and her reading glasses still perched on the end of her nose, although her book was lying ignored on her knees.

She narrowed her eyes and glared at me over the top of her spectacles. "You're not going back down there alone!"

I smiled and moved over to the bed, pulling back the sheet and climbing in next to my wife. Taking her book from her knees, I reached out to remove the spectacles from her nose and placed them on the bedside table. Then I put my arm around Deborah's shoulders, and pulled her to my side.

She snuggled down next to me, her head on my shoulder, listening intently as I explained. "No, not alone, but who comes with me depends very much on you."

This was the bit I really hated, but I forced myself to go on. "I don't like this at all, but I can't really argue that it would be incredibly useful to have you with me."

Deborah looked up at me and smiled, her face glowing with happiness. I defy you to show me another woman who would smile like that when you told her that you wanted to take her into a life-threatening situation with a species that stank like an abattoir, screeched like a rusty nail on a blackboard, and lied through their plaque-laden teeth. But she didn't care about any of that, as long as she could be with me. I really don't deserve her, do I?

You didn't have to agree quite so quickly.

Before Deborah could speak, I laid my fingers on her lips and went on, "But I refused point blank to take you down there without adequate protection, and I don't mean a squad of Marines."

My wife frowned as she looked up at me, so I hushed her again, as I went on, "Jack's not exactly thrilled with this solution either, but I told them flat that the only way you're going to come down there with me is if you agree..." Deborah blew a rather impolite raspberry at that one, so I grinned and repeated, "If you agree and Angel agrees to come with us. With both of you there, we'll all be as safe as we can be anywhere in the universe."

Deborah frowned again, silent for once as she mulled over the options. She obviously wasn't happy about her sister joining her in such a dangerous situation, but she's fair-minded enough to admit when a solution she doesn't like is still the best one available.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Deborah's face took on the gentle smile that I've learned to recognize as her making a mental connection with her sisters. After a few seconds, the smile faded and she looked up at me again, her golden eyes showing her doubts and sadness.

"Angel insists that she, Jack, G'Tan and No'Kar will be joining us. Jack has told her everything and she says there's no way she's letting you go down there alone. She says if you got yourself killed, I'd probably want to share Jack with her, and although Lily might believe in sharing, Angel doesn't."



Deborah tried to smile, but her eyes were filled with tears of gratitude for her sister's bravery and humor. I kissed her nose again, and asked softly, "So you'll come?"

The expression in Deborah's eyes changed instantly. Suddenly, the tears were banished and replaced by a rapacious leer. Before I could even blink, she'd shifted like lightning and sat astride me, rubbing her groin against mine.

"You'll be in a hell of a lot of trouble if I don't!"

She was right, of course.

In more ways than one.

We were up bright and early the following morning, by Excalibur ship's time. Making our way down to the landing bay, Deborah and I found that some people hadn't been to bed at all. Luke, Lily and Ilas stood by the window, watching what turned out to be the last of the shuttles full of shape-shifters coming in to land.

We learned that the shuttles had been running back and forth all night, evacuating the small population of the southern continent to the Excalibur. It had taken most of the night due to the detours the shuttles had to make to avoid being seen by the Nabulans' scanners. The job had been made even longer by the shape-shifters' understandable wariness and reluctance to leave their homes.

Luke turned and smiled wearily as Deborah and I joined the small group standing by the window, explaining, "Vya has had to persuade each group separately, and they've only agreed to come up once they were assured that another of their kind would be waiting to receive them." He nodded at Ilas, who leaned against the bulkhead to one side of the window.

The little shape-shifter looked exhausted, and I could see by Lily's worried glances at her sister that I wasn't the only one who had noticed. Deborah moved quickly to her youngest sister's side, and put her arm around Ilas' shoulders, gently tugging her to the floor, then sitting next to her, holding her hand. Lily subsided next to them, sitting cross-legged and taking Ilas' other hand. All three sisters closed their eyes and I wondered for a moment what they were up to. My unspoken question was soon answered.

I turned as I heard movement at my back, and saw Jack and Angel emerging from the bullet car station immediately behind us. Angel moved to join her sisters, while Jack came to stand next to Luke and me. We watched in silence as Angel joined her three sisters on the floor, closing the circle between Deborah and Lily.

As Angel's eyes closed, her hands began to glow where she touched her sisters. Then Lily and Deborah's hands also lit up where they held Ilas' hands, and I realized what the sisters were doing. They were transferring life-force to the youngest of them. To Ilas, who had once been the strongest of the four, but now in her declining years needed her sisters' strength to carry on the task she had set herself.

I bit my lip, not wanting to verbalize my concerns, but then Jack showed how much we're still alike by saying exactly what I'd just been thinking. "I'm not sure that's wise. Angelique and Demon may need all the energy they have if things turn sour down below."

Luke and I turned toward him, both with a slightly pitying smile on our faces. We'd both lived with our witches a lot longer than Jack had, so we knew what we were dealing with. I nodded at Luke, who spoke for both of us when he said, "You're probably right, Jack, but can you think of a way to stop them? Because over the years John, Matt and I have never found out how to do that. When it comes to their sisters, we don't get a say in the matter."

Jack gave a soft snort and smiled. "And there I was hoping you might be able to give me some advice." The laughter this provoked from me and Luke was interrupted by Deborah's deep, soft tones.

"When you boys have quite finished, you could give us a hand up, you know." She reached up her hand, which I took quickly and pulled her to her feet and into my arms. I could see tired lines about her eyes and mouth, showing how giving energy to Ilas had drained her, but I knew it was useless to protest. I just kissed her gently and smiled, saying nothing.

Jack and Luke helped their wives and Ilas to their feet, then we turned back to the window, watching as the last load of shape-shifters emerged from the shuttle carrying various bundles and packages with them.

Ilas smiled, looking much more energetic than when Deborah and I had arrived, her hair turning her favorite shade of blue as I watched, although her skin retained its natural golden sheen, and her eyes stayed deep red with vertical pupils. "OK, this is the last lot, then I promise I'll go to bed. I want to be fresh and rested for when Max and Dureena get back." With a saucy wink that made it clear why she wanted to be ready for her partners' return, Ilas slapped the landing bay door control and marched through the opening door, her back straight and head held high as she greeted the last of her people aboard the Excalibur.

The rest of us watched as she bowed and spoke to them, a Minbari Ranger translating for her. I asked Luke quietly, "Where have you put them all?"

Lily spoke before Luke could respond. "John had a section right at the far end of the ship cleared for them. He's been up on the bridge all night supervising the transfers. The shape-shifters are well away from any sensitive control systems down there, and they can have some privacy. Luke has been quietly scanning them all as they leave the landing bay, and we've been logging details of those who have illnesses or injuries. Ilas and I then escort them to their new quarters and get them settled in. Medbay is going to have their hands full for a few days, as there are so many in need of treatment."

The vibrant little redhead looked unusually weary and subdued, and I saw Luke give her shoulders a hug as he stood next to her, looking nearly as tired. It had obviously been a long, depressing night, and for a moment I felt slightly guilty that I hadn't been down there helping them.

Deborah must have picked up on my feelings as I got a dig in the ribs from a sharp elbow and a muttered, "You have enough to do today. Let others do their job and you save yourself for yours."

Which made complete sense of course, but I still felt a little guilty. Deborah turned her head to smile up at me, saying softly, "You're hopeless."

I shrugged and smiled back. "I know."

We were interrupted by G'Tan and No'Kar arriving to join us. We watched the last of the shape-shifters warily boarding the bullet car, with Lily herding them in from behind. Luke waved at us as he boarded the car behind his wife, calling softly, "Good luck!"

I looked at Deborah, Jack, Angel and the two Narns and wondered what in hell we were letting ourselves in for.

The shuttle ride down to the planet was mostly quiet and uneventful. Jack flew the shuttle, with Angel as co-pilot and G'Tan sitting in the centre seat. We'd insisted that we could fly the shuttle ourselves as we didn't want to put any more lives at risk than absolutely necessary. No'Kar, Deborah and I sat in the shuttle seats, and Deborah held my hand tightly.

From Deborah's demeanor you'd never have guessed that in bed the night before my wife had confessed to me how scared she was. Not scared of dying, but of living.

Deborah firmly believed that if she and I died together then we'd be together for all eternity. She had a belief in the afterlife which I find hard to share, but I kept quiet on the rare occasions when we talked of such things, and let her have her way. What scared Deborah most was that I might die and she might live. The thought of living alone, without me at her side, terrified her.

Many years before, on Centauri Prime, her fear of losing me had been so strong that it had awoken the Vorlon that lived within her, which had then proceeded to attack our captors and allow us to escape. That could never happen again, as the Vorlon had retreated into hibernation, but Deborah still feared life alone more than anything else in the universe.

Deborah worried that this made her a bad mother, as she knew it would be hard to live just for the children if I were gone, but I'd assured her that I felt the same. I loved our children dearly, but the prospect of life without Deborah was bleak. Once you've found your soul-mate, living alone would be unbearable. Delemn knew that, all too well.

So we held hands tightly, and sat in silence as the shuttle descended.

Angel broke the silence with a sigh. "I wouldn't mind the Nabulans so much if they smelled better. Why do they smell so bad? Earth reptiles don't stink like that."

G'Tan gave a deep chuckle. "That's because the Nabulans are not reptiles. They're mammals, just like you."

Angel's head whipped round to stare at the large Narn, her eyes wide. "Mammals? How can they be? They're all scaly and..."

G'Tan interrupted her. "Everything with scales isn't reptilian, you know. Take Narns for example. We have scales..." He paused to rub at his chin, making Angel giggle softly. "...but we're marsupials, not reptiles. The Nabulans are warm blooded, give birth to live young, and suckle. As they don't have pouches, that makes them mammals, just like you."

Angel snorted. "Not like me, I can assure you! I smell a damn sight better than they do! If I didn't, Baby would never come near me!"

Jack gave a quiet chuckle at that. "If you smelled like the Nabulans, Baby wouldn't be the only one who'd avoid you." That earned him a swat on the arm, and he looked around at G'Tan as he asked, "Aren't Narns the only intelligent marsupials in this galaxy that we know of? Why is that, do you think?"

G'Tan lifted his head up and gave Jack a very superior smirk. "Only Narn was special enough for the creator to deem it appropriate to be seeded with such a superior species as ours." The comment

was delivered with a pomposity that was totally undermined by the wink G'Tan then gave.

Jack and Angel both laughed, and as I glanced across at No'Kar, I could see she was smiling and shaking her head, obviously accustomed to her mate's teasing.

Jack said quietly, "Well, whatever the reason, all I can say is that I'm glad this universe has a place for the Narn people. Believe me; I know what the alternative is like."

A long silence followed during which G'Tan placed his large hand on his Captain's shoulder and squeezed it gently in reassurance. It was a timely reminder to us all that Jack had come from a dark universe, and we had to fight to keep our home from ever becoming like that place.

Even if it meant dying for that cause.

I squeezed Deborah's hand and looked into her eyes. The ripple of love she sent to me was as clear as words in my head would have been.

Dying isn't so bad, as long as you don't do it alone.

I was still holding Deborah's hand tightly as we walked through the corridors to the conference room. The Nabulans preferred a style of architecture which echoed the Brutalism movement of the mid 20th century on Earth. Their buildings were formed of harsh geometrical blocks of unfinished stone and concrete. The interior corridors were low and the lighting harsh. The humidity left the walls dripping with moisture and green with lichens and moulds that grew in the damp. Not the most welcoming environment from a human perspective, but I know G'Tan and No'Kar had admired the functionalism of the places we had visited. Tastes differ I guess.

At least the Narns hated the dampness and humidity as much as we did, if not more. Narns like a dry, hot climate.

Deborah walked beside me, her face frozen into that impassive, beautiful mask she wears to conceal her feelings from others. It doesn't work on me, of course, and I suspect Angel can see past it too, and we both knew that Deborah was trying to hide her fears of what we were getting into.

Trying to lighten the mood, I squeezed Deborah's hand as I glanced across at her and said softly, "I think I'm going to have to give you a raise for coming along on this job."

Deborah turned and for a moment her mask slipped, and she gave me a mischievous smile. "You'd have to pay me something, before you give me a raise."

I grinned back at her. "Oh, you get paid. On your back, the way you like best."

That made her chuckle, and she squeezed my hand as she grinned back, saying, "You'd better be prepared to work damn hard to pay my salary when we get back to the ship, then"

I smiled as I noted the 'when'. Not if, but when.

That was just the attitude I wanted to go in with. Confidence that we were going to get out of this place. All of us.



Angel's voice came from behind us. "Can't you two ever think about anything but sex? Bunnies, that's what you are! Sex mad bunnies."

I glanced back and saw Jack lean down to her as he whispered into her ear. I couldn't hear what he said, but I'm a good lip reader, and I swear the words he whispered were "Hello, Miss Pot."

Angel giggled and we entered the conference room on that welcome note.

It felt like entering a trap; a trap built of concrete and stone, with slime on the walls and the low ceiling pressing down on us overhead. I've never liked walking into traps, even when I was fairly sure I could get out again, as I did on this occasion. But this time, I had no choice. We had to give the bastards the chance to explain.

The Nabulans were already ranged in their places along one side of the long, heavy, concrete table. Did I mention before that Nabulans don't sit? They just sort of bend at the knees and balance on their tails. All our negotiations had been conducted standing, another black mark in the long tally I was keeping against them. I'm getting too old to spend hours standing and talking. My back and knees ached after every session.

So on this occasion I wasted no time. Marching up to the table, I slammed down the datapad I'd been carrying and leaned forward aggressively. Deborah took her place on my right, while Jack slid into position on my left, with Angel on his other side. G'Tan and No'Kar stood at our backs, protecting us from the rear.

This was the formation we'd worked out earlier, and although Jack and I hadn't been very happy about leaving our wives exposed at the flanks of our group this was the way the sisters had insisted we stand. Apparently this gave them the best positions for initiating a defensive shield around the group if needed.

The Nabulan leader hissed threateningly at my gesture, sending a wave of his/her stinking breath across the table. Before s/he could speak, I shouted, "We've had just about enough of this. We now have hard evidence that you're lying to us. You shot down one of our ships."

I lifted the datapad and shoved it into the Nabulan's face across the table, forcing him/her to recoil. It felt so damned good to drop the diplomacy at last. My anger was genuine, but I was using it as a tool at that moment, in a carefully planned attempt to provoke the Nabulans into talking straight for once.

It seemed to work. The voice sounding through the translation device in my ear said, "What evidence? Show us what leads you to make such an outrageous accusation."

S/he reached for my datapad, which I quickly withdrew. It was actually completely blank, just a prop for the scene I was trying to create.

"On our last shuttle ride back to our ship we had to divert to avoid a weather front, and we overflowed one of the southern continents. On doing so we picked up a faint distress signal, which on investigation turned out to be the wreckage of one of our ships. Unluckily for you, you weren't very thorough, and there were survivors. We rescued our people and they told us how you shot them down five years ago. Explain that if you can!"

The four Nabulans on the other side of the table all reached for their translation devices and switched them off simultaneously. They'd done this on occasion before during our sessions, but never so abruptly.

I looked around at Deborah, who said softly, "They're surprised and worried. They didn't expect this. The one in the middle is angry, but I think its anger is directed at the small one on the end, not at us. Now they're all getting angry. Brace yourselves, here it comes..."

Three of the four Nabulans rose off their tails at the same moment and launched themselves across the table at us, claws extended. The fourth, the small one at the end, started screeching into his/her wristband communicator, and I heard the conference room doors slam open behind us, bouncing off the walls as a horde of Nabulans surged through.

I think it was safe to say that the Nabulans were pissed.

The air in front of us shimmered, and the three attacking Nabulan negotiators were flung backwards. They smashed into the wall on the far side of the room, and lay, stunned, on the floor. Deborah and Angel's defensive barrier had stopped them dead.

I turned quickly, and saw that the other attackers had met the same barrier behind us. A shimmering bubble surrounded the six of us, protecting us from a direct physical assault.

Glancing at Angel, I saw that her eyes were wide, and they had turned completely black. Not a good sign. Angel was drawing on the dark energies she held within her, and she could easily lose control, and start attacking her friends as well as her enemies. We all remembered what had happened on Eriadne after her wedding, and none of wanted to see a repetition.

Before I could speak, Deborah moved swiftly to her sister's side and took her hand. Both sisters' eyes closed for a moment, and then opened again. This time, Angel's eyes were back to their normal color. She was back in control.

Angel's mouth opened and she spoke softly, somehow sounding more like Deborah than herself. "We'd better leave. They're just stunned, and while the barrier we've created can repel a direct physical assault and most missiles, we've had to leave it permeable, so the air can get through. That means lasers or PPG blasts might get through, too."

I nodded and waved us forward. This time Angel and Deborah were in the center of the group, with me on one side, Jack on the other, G'Tan taking point and No'Kar guarding the rear.

As we started to move out of the room, the Nabulan lead negotiator staggered to its feet. It turned on its translation device and hissed at us, "Don't think you can escape. Every Nabulan on this planet will give their lives to kill you. You are the race that drove our masters to leave us. We'll have our revenge against some of you, as you've prevented us from joining your alliance and destroying all of you from within. We will kill every race in the galaxy that shared in our masters' expulsion. We will wipe every trace of your people from the stars and pray that our masters will return from beyond the rim when your defilement is finally cleansed."

Oh great, another set of religious fanatics! Why do I seem to come across these lunatics so often?

I paused, and the group stayed with me, the force field created by the sisters still shimmering around us. I just had one question, then we could leave. I expected I knew the answer, but I had to ask.

"Who were your masters?"

The other Nabulans were stirring now, and I knew we had to get out of there.

"You called them the Shadows."

Well, that fitted. I nodded to the others and we started to move away. As we did so, I heard the blast from a PPG, and turned swiftly to see the lead Nabulan negotiator fall to floor, headless.

No'Kar raised a non-existent eyebrow as she asked, disingenuously, "What? It was attacking us, so I stopped it."

I had no idea where No'Kar had concealed the PPG, as we'd been searched for weapons every time we'd entered the negotiating room, but I looked around and saw that G'Tan also carried a PPG pistol. I always knew Narns were resourceful, but I still can't figure out where they hid those guns. Or maybe I just don't want to know.

Their pouches aren't that big.

Are they?

I snapped out, "Let's get out of here, before one of them turns a PPG on us."

We moved out of the room and started down the corridor at a brisk trot, but I heard Angel's snort of derision, this time spoken in her own voice. "Don't you think I can stop a PPG, Matt? Demon may have her doubts, but I don't." As she spoke, her tone darkened, and she went on, "I could destroy this whole city if I wanted to."

Jack reached out and grabbed her hand, squeezing it tightly. "But you don't want to, do you?"

Angel turned as she ran, and smiled at her husband, and the encroaching darkness cleared from her eyes once more. "Even if I did, I won't, unless you ask me to."

That was reassuring at least. I knew Jack would never ask for that, just as I would never... I mentally kicked myself for my stupidity. Jack wasn't me, any more than I was him. He was a darker version of me, and he could be damned unpredictable.

I knew I had to get my people out of there, not just for our own safety, but to prevent genocide. I may hate the Nabulans, their looks, their smell, their screechy voices and their hatred of my kind, but that didn't mean I wanted them wiped out. And Angel might just be able to do that.

I won't say our escape was easy, but with Deborah and Angel maintaining the shield around us, and with No'Kar and G'Tan taking down anyone who raised a weapon in our direction, we made it back to the shuttle unscathed.

Scrambling aboard, I flung myself into the co-pilot's seat, and Jack quickly slid into the pilot position. We'd left the engines on stand-by, so it was the work of a second to get us powered up. I checked all the scanners as we started to roll and groaned.

"Incoming from the rear." The scanner showed six objects coming in fast.

Deborah's voice came from behind me and I glanced back to see her strapping herself in securely.

"They're our escort. I linked to Lily as soon as the Nabulans attacked and she got John to send down fighters. He's also started the evacuation of the Southern Island. Trace is rounding up the archeologists and getting them back to the Excalibur."

That was exactly what we'd planned but it was reassuring to hear that our planning was working out.

I turned back to my scanners and saw the fighters fall into a protective pattern around us as Jack flung our shuttle into the sky. I hate to admit it, but he's a better pilot than I am. I would never have taken us upon such a steep trajectory. The acceleration pinned me back into my seat, and I heard a small grunt of protest from G'Tan who now sat in the center seat between Jack and I, ready to back me up on weapons operation if needed.

I heard Angel say, "Don't worry, I still have the shield up, and now I don't have to let air molecules in, I've hardened it enough so nothing can get through."

Angel's confidence was proven valid as the shuttle rocked with the force of a blast from a ground weapons array that should have blown us out of the sky. Two of our fighter escort peeled off and threw themselves downwards, firing at the array, blowing it to perdition, before surging back up to rejoin us.

After that, the journey back to the Excalibur was pretty uneventful. We got rocked by the occasional blast, but nothing that really threatened us. Nevertheless, I welcomed the sight of the Excalibur hanging above us, and especially the welcoming arms of the landing bay cowl, as we slid the shuttle into the ship's protective embrace.

Jack was just settling the shuttle to the flight deck when Deborah and Angel both screamed in pain.

My seat belt almost snapped under the strain as I span around to see what was wrong. The two sisters were both dead white as they sat, still strapped into their seats. Their eyes were wide and their faces twisted with pain.

I struggled to release myself from my harness, throwing myself at Deborah, grabbing her and pulling her into my arms, begging her to tell me what was wrong. Her eyes were glazed and she didn't seem able to focus on me, she was so lost in grief. I could hear Jack yelling at Angel, trying to get her respond, and I could feel wave after wave of devastating loss as Deborah projected what she was feeling.

I grappled with her seatbelt, and was finally able to pull my wife into my arms, holding her tightly against me, trying to understand what was happening, but I couldn't get through to her. She was so deep into the emotion that was overwhelming her, that she couldn't feel me or even sense that I was with her.

After a few moments, I stopped yelling and turned to Jack, asking, "Is Angel able to tell us what's happened?"

Whatever was going on, it had something to do with the sisters, so I hoped Angel, not having Deborah's empathic powers, might be less overwhelmed by the feelings that were flooding through their links.

Angel had her head buried in Jack's shoulder, but she heard my words and looked up, her face a picture of mourning as she whispered, "Max and Dureena are gone."

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