

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Five A - Part 3: Lost in Space

by *The Space Witches*



Max, Ilas and Dureena in their younger years.

Chapter 3

27th May 2284

Somehow, Jack and I got our wives out of the landing bay and along to Medbay. Angel had pulled herself together pretty well, but Deborah was a mess. She was linked to her sisters and was channeling all Ilas' grief, sending out waves of loss and longing that had us all feeling the strain.

My wife's empathic powers may not be what they once were but that day they were more than strong enough. I never want to feel those emotions from her again. Deborah clung to me as we walked, barely able to keep on her feet as she whispered over and over "Don't leave me, Matthew. Please don't leave me. Never, ever leave me."

I knew she couldn't help what she was feeling and sending. All the grief and pain Ilas was experiencing were washing through Deborah, and she was personalizing it, making the sense of loss her own, and identifying it with the thing she feared the most; losing me.

I tried to reassure her that I would never leave her, never abandon her as Ilas had been abandoned, but deep inside I knew it was a risk. There were hazards in the work I undertook on behalf of the ISA. Unless I changed my life and my work completely so we were never apart, I knew there was always a possibility that one day I might not come back from a mission. At that moment I

wondered if it was time at last to retire permanently and stay home with my family. Maybe the time had come, when this mission was over, to call it a day.

You can tell I was feeling all too mortal and vulnerable under the onslaught of the losses we had suffered.

And all the while I was trying to comfort Deborah, I was also trying to come to terms with my own feelings and grief. I had just lost three people I had known for many years. Dureena had been a true friend, and while Max and I had experienced a few ups and downs over the years, recently we had both mellowed and our relationship had become warmer.



Then there was Trace Miller. I had dragged him onto the Excalibur over seventeen years before and he'd stayed there ever since. Trace was the perennial Peter Pan, the boy who never really grew up. He'd enjoyed the lifestyle of the hotshot pilot, and he'd been known as the best in the business. Once he'd confided in me that living aboard the Excalibur was the best thing that could have happened for him. It gave him the sense of responsibility that he'd longed for since giving up the priesthood, while leaving him free to indulge his tastes for the finer things in life. Things that could be summarized as wine, women and song.

Trace loved to drink, but never let it interfere with his flying. He also loved women, far too much to ever commit to one woman alone. And Trace had loved to sing. He'd been a founder member of the Excalibur Barber Shop quartet, and his light tenor voice had featured strongly in many of the Excalibur's regular concerts. Trace had been a complex man, a surprisingly spiritual man at times, and while we had never been true friends, I would miss his humor and his wild stories. He was a great loss to the Excalibur, and I knew that John would mourn him as I did, or perhaps even more.

The loss of Dureena was much harder to bear. I would never forget the day we'd met, the missions we'd gone on together, how she'd confided in me about her childhood slavery, and how I'd tried to comfort her. Pathetically, inadequately, clumsily, but in the only way I knew how. I'd sensed her loneliness which at that time had been equal to my own, but I hadn't known how to help her any more than I'd known how to help myself.

Dureena and I had both erected our walls against a universe of pain and we'd both been hurt too many times to easily lower our defenses, even when we'd each sensed the vulnerability in the other.

The Witches of Eriadne had cured us both of that problem. I had found Deborah to share my life and my love, while Dureena had found Ilas, who had bonded them both with Max, and together Ilas and Max had given Dureena the child she had longed for: the beautiful Ilori.

Memories of Ilori's birth nearly overwhelmed me as we rode the bullet car to Medbay. I had stood as father to Dureena at her child's birth, and shared that miraculous moment when Ilori had come

into our lives. I had been fortunate enough to hold that beautiful baby in my arms within seconds of her birth, and I had never stopped loving that child or her mother ever since.

It's strange how love is something you have to learn, but once you've learned, as I had with Deborah, it seems there's no end to how much you can do it. I had loved Dureena in my way and now she was gone, and the universe was a poorer place without her.

Worst of all for me was the fact that along with Dureena I had lost my last chance to fulfill the promise I had made to her on Eriadne so many years before. I had never brought the murderer of her first child to justice. Lucas Buck had never paid for his crime against Dureena, and he had gone on to hurt other people I loved. I vowed again that one day I would make him pay for his evil. One day he would suffer, as he'd made others suffer, as Dureena, Ilas and Max had suffered at the loss of their child.

Which brought my thoughts to Max.

Maximilian Eilersen, the pain in the butt I had brought onto the Excalibur at the same time as Trace Miller. How do I describe my relationship with Max? He had infuriated me, driven me insane, saved my life, saved humanity with his interpretation of the records he'd found buried on Eriadne, nearly cost his own son his life and soul, and generally been an all round nuisance. A man full of contradictions. Brilliant intellectually but stupid when it came to people. Arrogant as hell and surprisingly vulnerable and insecure. Mind-blowingly inconsiderate but unexpectedly generous.

I don't think I ever really understood what drove Max. Maybe that level of genius is beyond the understanding of an average man like me. But in the end we had grown to tolerate each other, maybe even have a grudging respect for each other. And now he was gone.

The Nabulans has just blown a big hole in my personal universe, and I was determined they were going to pay for that.

When we arrived in Medbay, Angel and Deborah immediately went to join Lily and Ilas, who had huddled together in a side room of the main area. The four sisters wrapped their arms around each other and lost themselves in their own private merge of misery. As the merge took effect, the waves of grief started to subside, and I could only assume that Angel had asserted the control she now possessed over the merge to quell Deborah's empathic sendings.

It was a relief to us all but heartbreaking to watch how the three older sisters encircled their younger sibling, holding her, rocking her in their arms, surrounding her with their love. But the youngest of them now looked the oldest. As she huddled in the shelter of her sisters' love, Ilas looked older than ever. The loss of her mates seemed to have drained the last spark of life out of her, and I wondered if Ilas could survive this loss.

Jack and I moved to stand with Luke, who had been kneeling at Vya's side, trying to help the young shape-shifter comfort his younger sister.

Ilori was sobbing silently, clinging to her older brother, who looked stunned and unsure of what to do with the young girl. At that moment I could see all too clearly how young Vya was. He was,

after all, younger than my own son, Marcus, who had only just turned fifteen. For all his physical maturity, Vya was still a young man who was struggling to cope with the loss of two of his parents. Trying to soothe his sister as well as cope with his own grief was overwhelming him.

Jack and I looked at each other and didn't need to speak. Jack leaned forward and lifted Ilori into his arms, holding her tightly, cradling her head against his shoulder, and letting her cry. Luke and I sat on the floor next to Vya, and did what we could, pathetic and useless though it was.

I said softly, "I'm so sorry Vya. I wish there were some way I could let you know how sorry I am. We'll all miss Max and Dureena, but I know that none of us will miss them as much as you and Ilori. I know what it's like to lose a parent so suddenly and there's no words to provide the comfort you need right now."

I left it there before I rambled on into some cliché about time being a great healer. Max would have hated for me to use clichés to mourn his loss.

Vya took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks, Uncle Matt." It had been a long time since he'd called me that, and he looked heartbreakingly young as he said it. "It does help a bit knowing that Ilori and I aren't alone. Mom has her sisters, but me and Ilori..." He trailed off and I reached my arm around his shoulders to give him a hug.

"You and Ilori still have a family. Not the same, I know, but we're still all family. You'll never be alone, Vya. Never."

Tears welled up in Vya's bright blue eyes, the eyes he'd inherited from his father, the only part of Vya that never shifted. Whatever form he took, those bright blue eyes always sparkled out at you, full of life and humor. Now those eyes were reddened and heavy with grief and loss.

I hugged him again and said, "You have the Rangers, and I know you'll be feeling torn right now between your duties to them and your sense of responsibility for your mother and sister." Vya nodded and I knew that he'd been worrying about what he should do. I went on to reassure him, "Ilas and Ilori will have a home on Earth with Deborah and me for as long as they want."

Before I could go on, Luke interrupted, saying, "Or they can stay here on the Excalibur if they'd prefer. We can make a home for them here, too."

Vya sniffed and wiped his eyes. "Thanks Uncle Matt, Uncle Luke. We'll need to work out..."

Before he could finish his sentence the ship rocked violently. Something had hit the Excalibur and hit her hard. It seemed the Nabulans had brought the fight up into orbit and attacked my old command.

I looked at Luke, then over at Jack, who still cradled Ilori in his arms, but the little girl now seemed to have cried herself to sleep.

Vya saw the look Jack and I exchanged and held out his arms to take Ilori back. "Go on, get out of here, both of you. Get to the bridge and help Uncle John kill as many of those bastards as you can."

Vya was truly a son of his parents, none of whom had been renowned for their ability to turn the other cheek or forgive their enemies. Vya wanted vengeance and it was clear he expected Jack and me to help him get it.

Luke said quietly, "Vya's right, Matt. John would appreciate having the two of you on the bridge helping him co-ordinate if there's a battle. Get up there. I'll look after things down here." He waved at the sisters, who were still huddled together in the side room.

I was reluctant to leave Deborah, but I knew what Luke had said made sense. John and I had worked seamlessly together for many years when I commanded the Excalibur, and I could help him now in a battle.

Another violent rocking reinforced the need. With one last longing glance at our wives, Jack and I hurried from Medbay toward the bridge.

"She'll be all right, you know that." The words brought me out of the brooding I'd sunk into the second Jack and I had climbed aboard the bullet car on our way to the bridge.

I glowered at Jack, grief making me short-tempered. Well, that's my excuse, anyway.

"Since when have you become so expert?" I didn't have to ask who Jack was referring to.

"Demon's strong. Not as strong as she likes everyone to believe, but as long as she has you, her children and her sisters, she'll survive."

Jack was right, but I didn't like him knowing so much about my wife. I glared at him again as he went on. "After I left the Excalibur..." That was the polite way of saying it. My wife had actually colluded with him to help him escape the orders I'd been given to deliver him to Minbar for interrogation. "...we kept in touch. She wrote me letters and sent me messages keeping me up to date on news of you and the family, particularly about Angelique. I don't think Demon ever quite gave up hope that one day Angelique and I would get back together."



Jack smiled. Yet again, Deborah had been right about that. It had taken years but eventually Jack and Angel had found each other again and married.

Steering his subject into a less touchy area, Jack said quietly, "And I'm sorry about Max and Dureena. I know just how you're feeling now."

And that was true, of course. In Jack's own universe, Max and Dureena had died many years before, and in Dureena's case, while on a mission Jack had given her. At least I didn't have that guilt to carry with me. Max, Dureena and Ilas had come here of their own volition, at Vya's

request. That thought made me decide to watch my nephew closely and have a quiet word with Ivanova when I got the chance. Vya's guilt at the loss of his parents would be as great as his grief, and I can talk as an expert on the subject of guilt.

I acknowledged Jack's sympathy with a curt nod, but before I could say anything he went on, "And as far as deaths go, there's worse than going out in an instant blaze of light. Far worse."

I remembered what Deborah had told me about the way John and Dureena had died in Jack's universe: publicly tortured to death by the Centauri. At least in my universe Dureena and Max had died instantly. No fear, no pain, just an instant snuffing out of the flame of life.

"I wouldn't mind going like that." Jack's words were softly spoken, but still audible. I couldn't help but agree, but I didn't want to talk about death any more.

I grinned and said, "Don't you know we're not allowed to die? Deborah has given me strict instructions that I'm not to let that happen and I suspect Angel has said something similar to you."

Jack grinned. "Pretty much. She says we're going to live forever, and who am I to tell her she's wrong? I'm not brave enough." His grin faded as he went on, "Angelique is strong, you know. Stronger than she looks. So she'll help Demon get through this. They'll survive."

That I couldn't deny. Angel was a survivor. No one could have survived what she'd been through in her life without a core of steel beneath the soft and kittenish beauty of her surface appearance.

That thought helped buoy my spirits a little. Jack was right. Angel would help Deborah and together they would help their sisters. They would survive this loss. And so would I.

Another blow rocked the ship, almost hard enough to make the bullet car jump the tracks.

I gritted my teeth. "If we don't take out whatever is hitting us so hard, none of us will survive. Let's give John what help we can."

The bullet car slid to a halt as I spoke and Jack nodded silently, as we leaped from the car and headed for the bridge at a run.

I was appalled when I checked the map table and then the viewscreens. We had lost two Whitestars from our fleet and several of our Starfury fighters. Given how short a time the battle had been raging, this was an unprecedented casualty count.

As Jack and I reported to John we watched as another Whitestar lit up under the force of a beam from the planet below. Some very fast maneuvering got it out of the path of that beam of destruction, but not before it lost several layers of its plasteel armored hull.

John nodded tersely as Jack and I reported and quickly assigned Jack to liaise with the Starfury fighters while I was asked to co-ordinate our defense with the remaining two Whitestars. Fortunately, one of them was Ivanova's command ship. If we had lost the commander of our fleet in the opening shots of the battle, we'd have been in real trouble.

I spoke to Ivanova and within a few seconds we agreed a strategy which I communicated to John and Jack.

"The Whitestars and the fighters are to form a defensive ring around Excalibur, protecting her from the enemy fleet while she takes out the weapon on the planet below."

Now you might think it crazy that a ship the size of the Excalibur would need the protection of other ships, but the only way she was going to be able to take out a planetary weapon was to use the main gun, and that would leave her defenseless, with no power for anything other than life support and gravity, for one minute. That may not sound long but let me tell you, in the middle of a battle, a minute is one hell of a long time!

While we sorted the fleet out into the protective formation we needed, all the while still fending off the Nabulan ships that swarmed around us, I got chance to give that fleet a good look over. There was no doubt that the Nabulans had been hiding technology from us. Those ships were far beyond the level of technology we'd seen on the planet below. Which gave my naturally suspicious mind some particularly nasty ideas. Perhaps the Nabulans were using someone else's technology and ships. And who would have an interest in supplying such ships to a species that wanted to attack the ISA?

The hairs on the back of my neck started to lift and I began to get an uncomfortable feeling between my shoulder blades. It's the feeling I get when I think someone just might have a sniper scope trained on my back, and that little prickle could soon be followed by a bullet. I know that feeling all too well, having been shot in the back by a sniper during the early days of our search for a cure to the Drakh plague.

When we had our defense organized, I heard John give the command, "Bring the main gun on line and acquire target."

There was a moment of quiet on the bridge as everyone held their breath and waited for the weaponry officer to report. "Main gun on line and locked on target."

"Fire main gun"

John said the words with his usual calm way. No fuss, no excitement, just another order to his crew.

The lights dimmed and we all held our breath again. This was the worst time. Would the remains of our fleet be able to protect us while we were helpless? Or would the Nabulans break through and hit us with all they had? We could only wait.

When the viewscreens reactivated, the Excalibur was still in one piece. Which was more than could be said for our defending fleet. The Whitestar which had been damaged earlier by the ground based energy beam was now dead in space. I glanced quickly at the scanner station and from the energy readings I could see that it was a dead hulk. I could only hope that we might be able to effect a rescue mission for any crew left alive, but without life support and with the battle still raging around us, the prospects weren't good.

Ivanova's voice sounded in my earpiece, and I quickly reported to John.

"Ivanova says welcome back and will we please get some of the ten Nabulans currently attacking her off her back. Pretty please. With knobs on."

OK, so it wasn't a verbatim report, but you get the gist. Actually, Ivanova's language had been more colorful. Her years in Earthforce had given her vocabulary a piquancy that hadn't been lost in her time as Entil'zha. I made a mental note to get Ivanova and Deborah to compare notes. I'm sure Ivanova could learn some new expletives from my wife, and I just knew that Deborah would love to learn to swear in Russian.

John nodded tersely and gave orders for the port and rear batteries to open up on Ivanova's attackers, while the starboard and front guns focused on taking the pressure off our fighters, which Jack was coordinating through his own earpiece.

The battle was beginning to turn our way, with more of the Nabulan ships going down before our guns, when the Excalibur was jolted heavily. Damage reports came cascading into the bridge stations and it was apparent that we had lost most of our rear guns and a great slab of hull had been carved out of one of the Excalibur's fins.

John started to turn the ship away from whatever had attacked our rear, but we couldn't turn fast enough. The Excalibur is more nimble than she looks, but she's still one hell of a big ship to maneuver.

Our new assailant sped underneath the ship, carving a trench into the plasteel armored hull as it went, sending new waves of damage reports hurtling into the bridge. The wound it left in the Excalibur's hull wasn't quite deep enough to decompress us, but it was close. If we got hit again in the same spot we'd start to lose pressure and some important systems.

It takes more than one pass from the most powerful weapon to carve its way through the ten plus meters of plasteel and crystalline armor mesh that coated our hull, but whatever was attacking us was damned fast and incredibly strong, and it had sliced into us like butter. There was only one weapon I'd ever known that could do that to the Excalibur's hull, and I got that familiar tingling feeling back in the center of my spine. That old quote from Macbeth raced through my mind:

'By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.'

I'd been here before. Twice. Both times we'd been fighting an enemy that had links to the Shadows. Both times, the Excalibur had been badly damaged by the attacker, but had in the end managed to destroy it. Both times, we'd needed help from an outside source to do so.

The first time, the outside source had been the witches, who were currently curled up in our Medbay, grieving and unavailable. The second time it had taken over forty Whitestars to contain the Shadow ship long enough for the Excalibur to bring her main gun on line and blast it to oblivion.

We didn't have forty Whitestars helping us this time. We had just one.

There are times when the only response you can give to the universe is 'Oh crap, please give me a break.' This was one of those times.

The explosion of one of the workstations sent me reeling across the bridge, and nearly knocked John out of his chair. I grabbed at the back of the Weapons Officer's seat to stop myself falling, and the young blonde Lieutenant who was manning the weapons console turned and glared at me, then realized who she was glowering at and quickly shifted to an apologetic grin. I nodded an apology and watched as she went straight back to manipulating her station like a concert pianist caressing a keyboard. She didn't look old enough to be an Earthforce Officer, in fact she looked only a little older than my daughter, Mattie, but her stripes confirmed her rank and her mastery of her station confirmed her expertise.

I shook my head and told myself to stop second guessing John's command appointments, and got back on with my own job, which as that point consisted of reassuring Ivanova that we were still in one piece and passing on her orders as to how we were to deal with the new assailant.

I looked up at the front viewscreen and my worst fears were realized. The ship attacking us had that all too familiar spiky outline which revealed its origins. Only Shadow tech had that distinctly thorny appearance, looking like the outcome after a tarantula had mated with a porcupine. Any animal delivering that abomination would have died in the birthing.



This was the same class of ship that had twice attacked the Excalibur, and had twice been destroyed, but not easily. This was the same class of ship that had attacked and destroyed the Cerberus, killing all my friends and crewmates, leaving me to die of slow suffocation in space. And if the information I had received from Delenn was correct, this ship was the last of its kind.

Only three of these ships had been made by the Shadows. One had been given to

Earth's Psi Corps when they were infiltrated by Shadow agents, and we had destroyed that ship in the battle at Epsilon Delta 457.

One had been given to the Drakh and the last to the Streib. We had destroyed one of those ships over Stryxseptix, but we didn't know which one. Whichever it was, the last of the three ships was now attacking us and it looked like I finally had an opportunity to fulfill the promise I had made 300 times over, to avenge my lost comrades from the Cerberus.

If I survived, of course.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind far quicker than it takes to spell them out here, but even so, by the time I had hauled myself upright, the Shadow tech ship had spun around and was coming back to attack us again. I heard John order the fighters to get out of its way, as they stood no chance against its weapons, and I wondered why Jack hadn't given that order.

When I looked across the bridge, I realized that Jack had been thrown to the deck by the same explosion that had sent me reeling. But Jack had been closer to the station that had exploded and he'd caught the full force of the blast. He was on his back on the deck, bleeding from a wound on his head, his right arm and leg twisted under him at an unnatural angle, being tended by a young Medtech who had been assigned to bridge duty for the battle.

I couldn't pause in my own duties long enough to check if Jack was still alive, but I told myself that if he was still bleeding and the Medtech was bothering to spend time with him, he must still have a chance.

The Excalibur rocked again, and again the damage reports came in thick and fast. The landing bay had been badly damaged, and we'd lost sixty per cent of our port guns. At this rate, one more run and we'd be helpless in space, a sitting duck ready to be roasted and carved up by the Shadow Tech attacker.

John was trying to turn us again, getting our functioning starboard guns facing the attacker, but the ship moved too fast. Ivanova was doing her best to help us, flinging her Whitestar into a near suicidal attack, but her ship didn't have the speed or power to do much damage to the Shadow Tech ship.

For just one moment, I began to wonder whether having survived three assaults from a craft of this type, they were going to get me on the fourth attempt.

What happened next was inevitable, if I'd paused long enough to think about it. There was one thing in the universe that was unchangeable, defying distance, time and space, and that was the love of the witches for their partners.

There was a soft pop of sound and I felt a breeze as air was displaced at the back of the bridge. And they were there. All four of them.

Deborah and Lily held Ilas between them, while Angel ran forwards to where the Medtech was working on Jack. Her hair was laced with white and her eyes were black through and through. Angel was on the warpath and if she'd just teleported herself and her three sisters to the bridge, she was drawing on powers that were probably best left untouched.

But at that moment I have to admit that she was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, as suddenly our chances of survival went up significantly. If we could distract her from her concern for Jack.

I knew Angel would never listen to me, but she just might pay attention to her sisters, so I ran to the back of the bridge and grabbed my wife's arm, shaking her gently to grab her attention and turn her, Lily and Ilas to face the map table.

"Deborah, you have to get Angel to stop that thing."

I pointed at the image of the Shadow Tech attacker which was approaching fast, preparing to finish us off.

My wife nodded and closed her eyes for a moment. I glanced over at Angel, whose head whipped round as she sat next to Jack. Her black eyes sparked and I swear she hissed at her sisters, but reluctantly she rose and rejoined them at the map table, taking Deborah and Lily's free hands, bringing together the merge, creating the weapon the Vorlons had designed the sisters to be.

At one time Deborah had been the director of the merge, but she had relinquished that role to her younger sister as Angel's strength had grown and Deborah's powers had diminished with the hibernation of the part of the Vorlon she still carried inside her.

Now Angel controlled the merge and powered it, using an unknown energy source. All we knew was this; it was darker than the Vorlon power of the light. It came from a place deep inside Angel, a place she probably shouldn't go, but with the help of her sisters, she could remain in control of the dark powers she drew on.

As the merge took effect, a darkness formed around the sisters, like a shadowy cloud. Through the darkness I could see the outlines of the symbols hovering above the map table, and I could also see that the Shadow tech ship was on its final strike approach.

Then everything stopped. The Shadow vessel, and the whole Nabulan fleet. Every single enemy ship froze in place.

Angel turned to me, her eyes pure black as her voice echoed around the now silent bridge.

"OK, I stopped it. And all the others. Now what do you want?"

It was a damned good question

I have no doubt that anyone reading this account can probably think of lots of things they could have said and done at that point, but you weren't there, OK? You weren't waiting to get scattered across space as atoms any second, and therefore maybe you're thinking a little more coherently than I was at that point. To be honest, a lemming teetering on the edge of a cliff could probably have thought more clearly than I did right then.

But one of the things they teach you in Earthforce Officer Training is the importance of being decisive. Make a decision. Even if it's the wrong one. You can fix it later, but better wrong than indecisive. The key to success is, of course, to have thought through all your options beforehand, so you always have a decision ready to call on.

Yeah, like that ever happens in real life!

Angel--the merge--whatever--caught me on the hop with that one. The last thing I'd really expected was to be asked what I wanted. Come to think of it, wasn't that the old Shadow question? Didn't they always ask people what they wanted? And the worst thing they ever did to their victims was to give them exactly what they asked for.

I looked at Angel suspiciously, examining her eyes, fearing to see the blackness that had invaded them a few moments before, showing that she was too closely in touch with her darkness within.

Now, my sister-in-law's eyes were bright blue and sparkling with impatience. Nothing new about that.

I opened my mouth and the words that popped out took even me by surprise.

"I want to know what it is. Who's inside that thing? Where do they come from? What do they want? And is this the ship that destroyed the Cerberus?"

Well, if an apparently omnipotent force asks you what you want, you may as well go the whole nine yards!

Angel's eyes closed as if she were considering my requests, but other than that, nothing happened. The eerie stillness outside the ship remained, with all the enemy forces hanging in space as if time had stopped for them. Only for them, as I could see our sole remaining Whitestar and the Excalibur's Starfuries maneuvering themselves into more advantageous positions for when-if-the battle resumed.

I was taken by surprise by Lily's voice as she spoke from the merge, "John, we need your help."

In the past Deborah had always spoken for the sisters when they were merged, and I'd taken it for granted that since Angel had taken over the role of merge leader, then she would also be their spokesperson. Apparently I was wrong. Nothing new about that, either.

John finished giving quiet orders to his Exec from his command chair, then stood and moved to Lily's side, saying softly, "What can I do to help?"

Lily spoke again. "We have the usual telepathic block in place and it would be difficult to lower without disrupting the merge. But you can link to the Lily part of us directly, on your personal wavelength. Then you can link to Matthew and we can show him what he needs to see."

John nodded, closed his eyes and took Lily's hand in his. His head jerked briefly, and a grimace flashed across his face. I wondered what impact making telepathic contact with the merge might have, and concluded that it obviously wasn't fun. But whatever pain John might have felt was gone as quickly as it came, as he opened his eyes and held his hand out toward me, his face expressionless.

"If you give me your hand, I'll link you in. There'll be a brief moment of discomfort as you connect, but it's soon over. Linking with something this powerful is..." John's voice drifted into silence, as if he couldn't find the words to describe what he was sensing. He resumed quickly, "Never mind. Give me your hand."

I looked at John's hand with some trepidation. Did I really want to do this? I trusted John implicitly, knowing that he would never intrude on my private thoughts and feelings through his telepathic contact. But could I trust the merge? My wife, who I also trusted with my life, my heart and my soul, was part of that merge, but she was no longer the leader. Could I trust Angel not to rummage around in my head given the chance?

I had to decide which was more important to me: my mental privacy or my curiosity.

You know me well enough by now to know that curiosity is my besetting vice, so I slowly raised my hand and locked fingers with John.

'Discomfort' wasn't the word I would have chosen. Blazing, screaming, soul rending agony would have been more appropriate. But John was right in saying it was soon over. After a split second during which I felt as if every atom of my body had been ripped apart and spread across the universe in a fiery trail of particles, it was over and I was connected with something extraordinary.

How can I describe it? Maybe if an ant were to be given access to my brain for a few moments, it would feel as overwhelmed as I did then. How could an ant understand the surroundings in which it found itself? How could it understand the thoughts and feelings flowing through my mind and body? Probably about as well as I could understand the being that was the merge.

I was everywhere at once, hearing every sound and every thought, seeing everywhere, smelling and tasting everything, sensing every feeling in the universe. Billions and billions of sounds, sights, smells, tastes, thoughts and feelings hammered down on me all at once. I was drowning, unable to think or breathe under the weight of the information pouring into me.

Then it eased, my focus narrowed, and I became aware that I was hanging in space, looking at the Shadow Hybrid ship. For a moment I panicked, terror sweeping through me as I recalled my first encounter with such a vessel, alone in space in a suit that was rapidly running out of air. I started to gasp, dragging each sweet breath of oxygen into my lungs as if it were my last.



A wave of love and reassurance swept over me, soothing my fears and helping me regain my faltering breath. It was the merge, but more than the merge, it was Deborah, wrapping me in her love, cocooning me against the terrors of the cosmos. I became aware that I was not alone. I could sense John, still holding my hand tightly back in the physical world. I could sense the merge, that unique combination of all the sisters, surrounding us both and keeping us safe.

As I sensed them, I realized why the Vorlons had never been able to control the sisters. The Vorlons were a passionless species, who valued order above everything, rigid in their need to control; unemotional, cold and detached. If I had to choose an image to personify the Vorlons it would be ice.

The merge was a thing of love. Love was what bonded the sisters together, and love was what drove them.

In that moment I sensed them all together, each sister distinct and different, but blended into a whole. I felt the love of my wife for me, her passion and lust, her desires and her needs. Then I felt all the sisters' passions for their partners and I was almost overwhelmed by the grief the Ilas element felt at the loss of her loves. I felt the love of the mothers for their children, their need to

protect and cherish, their pain in letting go as their children grew. I felt their passion for life in all its forms and I knew that the merge would never let me come to harm. The only term I could think of that encompassed them was 'warmth'. The antithesis of the Vorlons' ice.

As I calmed, I even began to enjoy the sensations I was feeling. I was out in space, able to see everything, but I could still breathe easily, with none of the combined agoraphobia and claustrophobia that inevitably accompanies the experience of being inside a suit in space. Everyone suffers from these feelings to some degree. Some more than others. Since the loss of the Cerberus, my phobias had been extreme. Now they flowed away from me, and I relaxed, allowing the merge to sweep me forward toward the Hybrid ship.

I flinched as we were about to hit the outer hull, but before we could impact we were through it.

The internal structure of the ship was strange. It was more like flowing through the blood vessels of an animal than through the corridors of a ship. It was semi-organic, part-machine, part living thing, a blend of mechanism and organism that somehow felt like a crime against life itself. The twisted nature of the beast not only felt alien, it felt utterly wrong. I could feel the merge grieving for the living being that had been twisted and torn to become this ship, as we searched for the mind that drove it.

My mind was driven through the pulsing walls and viscous fluids of that vessel, searching, seeking, needing to find its soul. The merge believed that every living being has a soul, and that every soul can be redeemed, if only it can be found and helped.

I'm a little more skeptical.

But we found it in the end, that merge of the sisters, John and I, and what we found amazed us all.

Because what we found was a human child. Or so we thought.

We were deep inside the Shadow vessel when we found her, entwined in a tangle of vine like cables, which twisted around her, over her, under her, into her and through her. It was hard to tell where she ended and the ship began.

I'd never seen anything like it in my life, and I've seen some pretty amazing sights. 'Cyborg' doesn't really cover it. Had she been added to the ship or had the ship been added to her? Whatever had happened they were one integrated being now, and there was no way we could see that she could be extracted alive from the vessel which entombed her.

I'd heard of this before and cursed softly to myself as I cast my mind back. Years before, John Sheridan had told me about humans who had been taken by the Shadows as core processing units for their ships. Apparently, Shadow ships could only operate with a sentient being inside them, and humans made particularly good adaptations to this hellish environment. Many species could not be effectively integrated into the ships, being insufficiently flexible to cope with the changes forced on their bodies and minds. If the 'pilot' couldn't adapt properly to the ship, the result was a confused and uncoordinated vessel. Humans made good adjustments. Some of them, anyway.

Sheridan's second wife, Anna, had been taken by the Shadows on Z'ha'dum, and integrated into one of their fighters. Although they removed her later, she was never the same, and had died on Z'ha'dum when Sheridan had crashed his Whitestar into the surface.

The biggest problem the Shadows had suffered with their merged vessel was that the link between ship and pilot could be disrupted by a telepath. This had been used against them to good effect during the last Shadow war. The Shadows had overcome this issue by integrating telepaths into their ships, who could resist the outside interference. Dozens of 'blips' or rogue telepaths in the days of Psi Corps had been kidnapped by the Shadows and integrated into their ships.

Sheridan had helped a Psi Cop, Bester-whom John and I had once encountered-to save a shipload of telepaths from that fate, but they had never been able to rehabilitate those victims from what had already been done to them. Sheridan had then used thirty of those telepaths to disrupt Earthforce ships in the last battle for Earth when he had commanded the Agamemnon (and incidentally a young officer called Matthew Gideon) in the final fight against President Clark's forces.

What lay in front of me now was one of the telepaths who had not been fortunate enough to be rescued. I didn't appreciate this at first, only seeing the tiny, fragile, human body, barely visible in the tangle of mechanisms that surrounded her. But then the link between my mind and John's almost vibrated with pain and grief as he made contact with the girl's mind and realized what she was.

I heard his thought, [[That could have been me!]] Then I felt the wave of love and concern that came from the merge and soothed his pain just as my panic had been calmed earlier. The sisters were watching us carefully, caring for us, shielding us in whatever way they could. The merge loved us and would never allow us to come to harm.

Through the eyes of the merge I looked again at the child and realized that she wasn't as young as I'd first thought. It was her tiny stature that had fooled me, as tiny as Lily's, but what I could see of her face and form through the entanglements was more mature than I'd initially appreciated. This was a woman, not a child.

Visions flooded into my mind as John established his link to the telepathic pilot of the Shadow vessel. Images of childhood, playing in green fields under a vivid blue sky filled my mind. Happy feelings accompanied the images, and I could tell this woman had been contented as a child. Then the images became darker. Confinement in a barrack like building which somehow through John's experience I knew was the Psi Corp compound in Geneva. These times were darker, with pressures and demands, discipline and punishments. These years had been miserable.

Suddenly, there was a burst of light again, and a sense of relief and happiness. Escape! The world became brighter and we could sense the woman's joy at her flight. Her senses soared and we could see there was someone with her, someone who loved her and was loved. For a brief period of this woman's adult life, she had been happy again. Free of the restrictions imposed by the Psi Corps, she had lived for a while as a normal human, with a partner who gave her joy.

It didn't last for long.

Soon the visions were curdled with pain. The pain of loss as she was taken from her lover, and agonizing, soul destroying pain of body and mind. The things that had been done to the poor woman were unspeakable. She had been systematically tortured and abused, mentally, physically and sexually, by her new captors, human and alien, before being confined first to a cryogenic freezer unit, then installed into her ship. A glimpse of the beings who worked on her as she was linked to the ship showed that she had been given to the race who became humanity's worst enemies: the Drakh.

They had shown no mercy as they had stripped the flesh from her, linking her nervous system to the ship, regardless of the agony they caused. I have known pain in my life, but never anything to match the pain that poor woman felt as she was made part of a Shadow ship, was made into a weapon of destruction against her own race.



Then the visions changed again, and the joy returned. The woman was happy in her new state, at one with her ship, following her orders and attacking the enemies of her new masters. Visions flooded my mind of her dance through space, spinning through nebulae and screaming down on her victims. She sang to her ship and her ship sang back to her as they wove a path of joyous destruction through the cosmos.

There was no more love or happiness in this conjoined being, just the delight in annihilation, the love of inflicting pain on others, rather than having pain inflicted on her.

Then just for an instant I recognized her vision for what it was. It was her memory of her attack on the Cerberus. The thoughts and feelings that flashed through her mind went too fast for me to capture, but the merge caught them, and replayed them back to me at a pace I could comprehend.

I felt the pilot's anticipation when she happened upon the Cerberus, a weak prey for her attack, but still an opportunity for enjoyment. That's all it was. There was no sense or purpose to her attack. She did it for fun. She'd had no orders to destroy, but when she came across an easy target, she'd been unable to resist.

I had lost 300 crewmates to an insane telepath's lust for murder. Nothing else.

I tried to remember that she wasn't responsible for her insanity. That she had been driven mad by the things that had been done to her, dreadful things that no being should ever have to suffer. But it wasn't enough. I felt my hatred for her casual murder of my shipmates boil inside me. It was like a poisonous bile in the pit of my stomach, twisting my guts with the need for vengeance. I tried to control it but I was too late.

The visions stopped abruptly and I felt my consciousness jerked back to the Excalibur so fast my head span and my stomach felt as if it had been left outside the hull. I staggered and lost my grip

on John's hand. Suddenly, I was back on the bridge, with John standing beside me and the sisters still gathered around the map table, hands held tightly, enveloped in their cloud of darkness.

As I looked at the map table through the cloud, I realized something had changed. All the symbols indicating the presence of enemy ships had disappeared. The enemy was gone, wiped from space as if they had never existed. And with them, the destroyer of the Cerberus and murderer of my friends.

A few minutes passed before everyone on the bridge took in what had happened. Well it's not every day you witness a miracle, is it? Although calling it a miracle is a bit of stretch, I guess, as the death of hundreds if not thousands of sentient beings wouldn't usually fall into that category. But then again, there were hundreds of sentient beings aboard the Excalibur and the remaining Whitestar and we were now safe, so that works for me.

I watched as the cloud surrounding the sisters dissipated and the merge was dissolved. For a moment, all the sisters looked a little dazed and confused. Angel was the first to come to her full senses, and she flew-not literally for once-across the bridge and fell to her knees at Jack's side.

My doppelganger had regained consciousness during the preceding excitement and was now sitting upright, holding his head in his hands, groaning softly. He'd been patched up by a medic, but still looked groggy. Angel knelt at his side, took his hand, and started murmuring soft words into his ear, which had the effect of making him smile. I stretched an ear, trying to hear what was being said, but my curiosity remained unsatisfied. I hate that.

Deborah was leaning against the map table, while Lily held onto Ilas' hand, placing an arm around the shape-shifter's waist and lowering her gently to the deck. John had moved back to his command chair, giving out crisp orders, getting his ship back under control and sending out repair crews to work on the damaged part of the ship.

I could hear Ivanova's voice in my earpiece, asking what the hell had happened. Well, that was a good question, but I wasn't sure I had a good answer, so for the moment I ignored the voice, took out the earpiece and went to join my wife. I'd deal with Ivanova later. Hey, what's the point of being retired from Earthforce if I can't ignore the chain of command when the mood takes me?

Deborah was still leaning against the map table, with one hand held against her forehead, as if she had a headache. I couldn't recall an occasion when merging with her sisters had left her in pain before. Usually, the sisters came out of the merge suffused with a sense of strength and well-being. This time seemed different.

"Are you OK?" I put my arm around Deborah's waist and she leaned against me. I could feel her shivering, and looking more carefully, I could see her face was devoid of color except for the blue tinge around her lips. Her breathing was quick and shallow. "What's wrong?" As I asked, Deborah's knees gave way and she sank to the deck, dragging me with her as she tried to curl up into a tight ball.

Now I was really worried. I lifted a hand to Deborah's face and it was icy cold. No wonder she was shivering. She was freezing!

I took my jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders, calling out for the medic who was just finishing checking out the bridge crew. The young woman came over and knelt beside us, holding a scanner out toward my wife. Then she frowned.

"This is odd." It wasn't the most informative statement I've ever heard from a medic.

"What's odd?" Deborah was still shaking and was uncharacteristically silent.

"The readings are all over the place. Her body temperature is down nearly five degrees. She's in stage 3 hypothermia, but that's impossible!"

"Well it may be impossible, but it's happening, so do something!"

Deborah was now curled into a tight ball, her breathing becoming more and more erratic. I looked up as Lily and Ilas joined me, reaching out to their sister.

"I don't know what's wrong, but maybe if we can merge again, we can help her." Lily reached out to take Deborah's hand but flinched and recoiled as she touched my wife's fingers. "Cold!" Lily sucked her fingertips as if they'd been burned.

I now felt as if I was holding a block of ice, and I started to panic. I didn't know what was happening but it felt like Deborah was dying in my arms. My fears intensified as her shivering stopped and I could no longer hear her breathing.

I shook her desperately, calling out her name, trying to bring her back from wherever she'd gone, at the same time wrapping my body around her, to give her whatever warmth I could. My hand where it touched her face was freezing, and my fingertips started to burn but I didn't care. If I lost fingers to frostbite they could be regrown. I couldn't contemplate losing my wife!

Suddenly all the death and destruction around us paled into insignificance compared to the impact on my universe of the loss of this one woman. I looked up at Lily and Ilas in total despair and begged them, "Help her!"

Lily was weeping with pain and frustration as she tried to give Deborah her warmth, ignoring the pain in her fingers as she held onto Deborah's hand but nothing seemed to be working. Then Angel arrived at my side, and reached out to touch Deborah's head, saying, "Maybe I can do something."

Angel's eyes closed and the next thing I knew I was on the other side of the bridge, with Angel beside me. We'd both been blown clear in a soundless explosion of power.

When I shook my head and cleared my sight I was horrified. Deborah now lay rigidly outstretched on the deck, surrounded by a ball of white light. Lily had also been thrown away from Deborah's stiff body and only Ilas now remained by her side.

As I watched, Ilas' form started to shift. She started to glow and lose her physical shape, shifting into something that I had only seen once before and hoped never to see again. Gradually, Ilas seemed to lose substance, becoming transparent, but still radiant as tentacular appendages spread out from her glowing core.

The white light that surrounded my wife's body began to take a similar shape and I finally realized what was happening.

Deborah had carried part of a Vorlon inside her for years, but in recent times it had been held dormant, hibernating within her, hiding itself away from all of us. The Vorlon was now emerging, and in the process it was freezing my wife to death.

Communicating with Vorlons has always been difficult as they're beings of light and energy, inhabiting a plane of existence that barely touched the 'real' world. But they're incredibly powerful beings, and this one seemed set on killing Deborah as it emerged.

With complete stupidity I launched myself across the bridge, grasping at the insubstantial energy trails that made up the Vorlon's body, trying to beat it off my wife's rigid form. I may as well have tried to fight smoke. But this smoke could fight back, and one of the Vorlon's tentacles lashed out toward me, sending me flying across the bridge again, where I came to a landing next to Angel.

Jack had joined his wife and was trying to rouse her, but Angel was unconscious. She had taken the brunt of the initial burst of power that the Vorlon had emitted as it emerged.

Now Ilas was shifting back to her natural form and she lay on the deck, panting from the effort she had made.

Lily joined her sister, and held her hand, trying to infuse her with life force. Ilas shook her head and looked across at me, panting, "We roused it when we took out the enemy fleet. Now it wants us. It wants all of us, but especially Demon and Angel. If it can take our power it can move beyond the Rim and rejoin its race. But if that happens they may come back. They may decide there's something in this galaxy worth taking after all. We can't let that happen."

I totally agreed but had no idea how we could possibly prevent a Vorlon doing whatever it wanted. I had once persuaded the creature to sleep, to hibernate, before it killed my wife. Somehow, I suspected that the time for persuasion was past. This time the Vorlon would take whatever it wanted, including Deborah's life, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Fortunately, not everyone on that bridge was quite as powerless as me. I watched as Ilas withdrew herself from Lily's embrace, smiling gently at her nearest sister. There has always been a special bond between Ilas and Lily, just as there was between Deborah and Angel. The shape-shifter reached out and touched Lily's face gently, whispering something I couldn't hear.

Lily screamed, "NO! You can't...you mustn't..." but Ilas had withdrawn her touch and was shifting again.

Her form started to glow again, becoming translucent, shining with energy as she resumed the Vorlon form. I'd never before realized Ilas' powers, never appreciated the range of her abilities. Now she truly became the creature of air she had always been. Each of the sisters represented one of the four elements; Angel was fire, Lily was earth, Deborah was water and Ilas was the air that gave life, the breeze that refreshed, the hurricane that destroyed.

Ilas unleashed that hurricane now and joined battle with the Vorlon. Her tentacles wrapped around it, squeezing sparks of power from it that arced around the bridge, blasting chunks out of every surface it touched. I heard John call for damage control parties, but I was too occupied in crawling to my wife's frozen body to worry about the debris flying around my head or the damage being done to the Excalibur. All I cared about was that the Vorlon should release Deborah from its freezing grip.

The two energy forms entwined above our heads, and one started to drag the other to the front of the bridge, energy bolts flying as they inched toward the front viewscreen. John threw himself out of his chair as the energy beings approached him, only just avoiding one of the tentacles that had lashed out toward him. Instantly, Lily threw herself across the bridge, trying to put her body between the blinding light forces and her partner. As she reached him, John grabbed her and spun her around, shielding her with his own body as another whiplash of light emerged from the fray, catching him in the middle of his back and throwing the two of them across the deck, sending them crashing into the map table where they lay unmoving.



Jack was still trying to revive Angel but without success and Deborah lay in my arms, but at least the cold was dissipating from her body, and I could feel a slow pulse under my fingers. Ilas had dragged the Vorlon away from her eldest sister before it could completely drain the life from her, and now the shape-shifter seemed to be trying to drag the Vorlon outside of the ship.

The battle that raged on the bridge brought a rain of destruction down on all of us, with sparks and debris flying in every direction. My last memory was seeing the battling energy forms sliding through the viewscreen and out into space.

Then there was nothing.

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When I next became aware of anything, all I could see was a blank, pale ceiling. Not very informative. I moved my head to one side to improve the view and instantly wished I hadn't. It felt as if my head just might fall off at any moment, and the way I felt right then, I would almost have welcomed its departure.

Waves of pain pounded at my temples, my neck was stiff and sore, and the rest of my body decided it didn't want to be left out of the chorus of complaints that every muscle and joint was inflicting on me. If you haven't got the idea by now, I was hurting, OK?

It took a moment to grasp my surroundings, then I relaxed a little, as I realized I was in Medbay. Best place for me when I felt like I did right then. The only problem was that I was in desperate need of a piss, and I was going to have to get out of my nice, comfortable bed and stagger to the

bathroom to do that. Don't get me wrong, now. The staggering bit was better than the alternative. I've had a catheter inserted somewhere unmentionable once in my life, and that's something I NEVER want to repeat.

I was so obsessed with all the signals my body was sending to my brain that it took a few moments before my memory kicked into gear and joined in the general consensus of complaint. Questions started popping in my head like firecrackers, each one sending a new shaft of pain to the back of my eyes.

Where was Deborah? Was she safe? What had happened to me? Were John and Lily OK? What about Jack and Angel? Was the ship OK? What had happened to the Vorlon? What had happened to Ilas?

I needed answers to some of these questions before my head exploded. Fortunately a quick, but excruciating turn of the head answered the first question. Deborah was right beside me. We were in a side room, off the main Medbay, and my wife lay still, but breathing deeply and steadily, on the bed that had been crammed in next to mine.

I reached out-my neck and shoulders gave me hell for that!-and touched her face. It was warm and soft, showing a soft blush of color over the cheekbones. There were no tubes or equipment attached to her, and the monitors above her bed all showed normal readings. My wife was enjoying a nice sleep, and I can't describe how happy that made me feel.

It also sorted out my priorities, so I groaned and moaned my way out of the bed, across the room and into the bathroom.

By the time I came out-still stiff and sore but with one problem taken care of-a figure was standing by Deborah's bed, his hand resting gently on her wrist. Luke Raven smiled as he watched me stagger back to my bed, and before I could speak he started to answer some of my unasked questions.

"You took quite a pounding up on the bridge, but there are no broken bones, and the painkillers should kick in shortly. You'll be stiff and sore for a few days, then you'll be fine. So will Demon. She'll probably wake up with a sore head and feeling very weak for a while, but that will pass. Recovery from the degree of hypothermia she suffered takes a few days, but she just needs to rest and keep warm. Once she wakes up and feels ready to move, you can both go back to your quarters."

I nodded gratefully as I climbed painfully back into bed and lay my sore and battered body back down onto the comfortable mattress. I usually hate being in Medbay for any reason, but right then I just wanted to lie down and take a nap. But there were more questions that needed answering.

"How are John and Lily? And Jack and Angel? I saw them all get hit by... well, by whatever that thing was."

Luke's face fell into more somber lines. "John suffered third degree burns to his back and three fractured vertebrae where he was hit. We fixed the burns but the fractures will take a little longer to heal. Fortunately there was no damage to the spinal cord, so he should be fit for duty in a week

or so. In the meantime, Lieutenant Commander Ferguson is in charge. He's overseeing all the repairs to the bridge, which was pretty much demolished in the fight."

The pause that came next was longer and more painful, but Luke gathered himself and went on, "Lily was quite badly hurt. Several fractured ribs, both legs broken, her right foot nearly severed, a ruptured spleen, and her liver was pierced by a shard of debris. We nearly lost her." Luke's next words were accompanied by a very tentative smile. "But she's a tough little thing. She wouldn't let go and fought through. She's still very weak but out of immediate danger. She should make a full recovery in time-but it will probably be a long time before she's walking unaided. Longer than she'll be willing to tolerate, I'm sure." Luke gave me a rueful smile, acknowledging what we all knew-Lily wasn't the most patient of patients.

I let out the breath I hadn't been aware of holding as Luke had catalogued Lily's injuries. The thought of losing the tiny redhead would have been devastating for all of us, but most of all for her partners and children. We had lost too many good people on this mission; we couldn't afford to lose more.

"That's good. Can Deborah and I do anything to help with the children?" I knew Dasha, Faylinn and Naima would be worried sick with two of their parents injured and confined to Medbay.

Luke shook his head and smiled. "They're fine, but thanks for asking. You two should focus and getting your strength back, then you can start worrying about other people."

I snorted a half-hearted laugh. "My biggest problem is to stop worrying about other people. What about Jack and Angel? The last I remember Angel was unconscious."

Luke nodded again. "She was out cold when she was brought in here, but she soon came around. Jack took her back to the Angel's Rest a little while ago. She's got a mild concussion which will make her head sore for a while, but otherwise, they're both fine. Just a few bumps and bruises that were soon sorted out with the regenerator. Now, I have other patients to see, so..."

I interrupted before Luke could leave the room. "One last question. What happened to Ilas? If my memory is working OK, and I must admit I have my doubts, the last thing I saw was her shifting into Vorlon form and fighting the Vorlon that had emerged from Deborah. What happened?"

Luke's face creased with pain, and I saw his eyes fill with tears. "We don't know exactly. I've seen Ferguson's report and those bridge crew who were still conscious by that point report that the two energy forms passed through the viewscreen and out into space. That blasted the electronics of the screen and from that point on the bridge was blind. I've heard reports from the Whitestars that they saw a bright white light emerge from the Excalibur's bridge and head for the sun. It disappeared into the corona and hasn't been seen again since. I think..." Luke broke off, unable to finish his sentence.

I took a deep breath and finished it for him. "Ilas is gone. She gave her life fighting the Vorlon, saving Deborah, saving her sisters, saving us all. She's gone, isn't she?"

Luke nodded. "We think so. When Angel woke up, she tried to link with her sisters. She could feel Demon and Lily, although they were both still unconscious, but she couldn't sense Ilas at all. She

said there was a hole in her head where Ila should have been. That's part of the reason Jack took her back to their ship. She was devastated, and we can expect Demon and Lily to feel the same when they awake. You need to be with Demon when that happens."

I nodded and watched Luke turn to leave the room. As he reached the door I asked, "Who's with Lily? She'll feel it the worst. She was closest to Ila."

Luke paused and nodded. "I know. The children are taking it in turns sitting with her. They'll call me when she comes around."

With that he left to go back to his duties, which I knew were more extensive than just taking care of his injured family. A lot of people had been hurt that day and many had lost their lives. And for what?

I lay back in bed, listening to Deborah's soft, regular breathing, reaching out to hold her hand in mine and going over the events of the day in my mind. Was there anything I could have done differently to prevent the terrible losses? I couldn't think of anything I could have done to stop the Nabulans attacking us. I couldn't think of any alternative to calling on the sisters' powers to help us survive that attack. But maybe if I had kept my temper when I realized the ridiculous futility of the loss of the Cerberus, maybe if my thirst for vengeance for the death of my friends hadn't overtaken me, maybe then I could have prevented the total destruction of the Nabulan fleet. Maybe we could have negotiated a peace with them.

Too many 'maybes'.

I shook my head and dismissed the idea. The Nabulans had been deceiving us from the start. They'd never intended to negotiate a peace with the ISA. Perhaps now their fleet had been obliterated we could go back and find out what they'd been up to all along. Or perhaps we'd just set up a blockade around the system, warning off all shipping in the area. That was one for the politicians, not for me.

And at least the promise I had made 300 times over-the promise to find out what had really happened to the Cerberus and why-was finally fulfilled. I just wish the answer could have had more meaning. I wish all those deaths had served some higher purpose. But the universe doesn't care about my wishes, and I would just have to live with the frustration of knowing that an insane telepath had killed all my friends for the fun of it.

The twitching of Deborah's fingers in my hand warned me that she was waking up and I steeled myself, knowing that I was going to have to comfort her in the face of the losses we had all sustained.

I turned onto my side, lifting myself up onto my elbow so I could watch my wife's awakening. Two vertical lines appeared between her eyebrows as she frowned and I knew she was in pain. I squeezed her hand gently and spoke quietly, "Luke says you'll have a sore head but it will soon pass. You just have to rest for a while."

Deborah's golden eyes flickered open and she focused on my face and muttered, "That's easy for him to say! It's my head not his." She lifted her free hand and rubbed her forehead, all the time



squeezing my fingers where we touched. The gentle ripple of love that washed over me took me by surprise.

"You're sending!" I didn't mean to shout and honestly I don't think I spoke that loudly, but Deborah winced.

"Stop yelling. And why shouldn't I send? You're lucky I'm not sending this headache."

I suspected that Deborah had no idea what had happened, a suspicion that was confirmed when I asked her what she last remembered.

"Angel dragged us all up to the bridge and you asked for our help. After that, it's all a blank. What happened? I assume we won the battle, or we wouldn't be here."

This wasn't going to be easy, but I knew I was going to have to tell her about all the events of that day, including the loss of one of her sisters, and the hurts of another. It was one of those times when I wished I'd stayed asleep longer. Then Luke could have broken the news.

Quite a while later I held Deborah in my arms while she cried softly into my shoulder. The t-shirt that had been put on me while I was unconscious was already damp, but that was a small price to pay. On the whole, Deborah had taken the news well, and I think a part of her had already known that Ilas was gone. Deep down, the sisters were connected in a way the rest of us could never understand. Losing a sister would create a wound deeper than I could imagine, and even in her unconsciousness, I think Deborah was aware of that loss.

Lily's injuries seemed to have distressed her far more, as was confirmed when Deborah pulled herself together and whispered into my shoulder, "I think I knew something was wrong, but I didn't realize that two of my sisters were affected. I thought it was just Ilas..."

Her words trailed off into silence and I hugged her gently, asking, "Did you know? Did you feel her go?"

Deborah nodded. "A part of me felt her die. She wanted to die after Max and Dureena were lost. She couldn't bear to live without them. But she died saving me." The tears started again and I hugged my wife tightly, wishing I could defend her from all the pains the universe threw at us, feeling useless and helpless.

I leaned down and kissed Deborah's red nose and her swollen eyelids, murmuring, "She died saving us all. The Vorlon could have destroyed the Excalibur if she hadn't intervened. Vorlons helped build this ship, so they'd know how to take it out. But why did it choose now to come out of hibernation? Do you have any idea what happened?"

Deborah nodded and sniffed, "I think when the merge destroyed the Nabulan fleet the Vorlon must have sensed the power we used. I still don't know how we did that; I don't remember anything about it. Maybe Angel will know more as she leads the merge now. But I guess if Ilas said the Vorlon wanted that power, it was probably prepared to take all of us to get it. If Angel and Lily were out of the picture and I was being frozen to death by the Vorlon, Ilas had to stop it in the only

way she could. She turned herself into one of them and fought it. I had no idea she could do that, and I doubt if she knew until she tried. Ilas was always the bravest of us. Nothing intimidated her, not even the Vorlons. Nothing really frightened her except..."

A hiccup interrupted her narrative, but then she swallowed and went on, "Nothing frightened Ilas except being alone. She always hated that. When we first came together she couldn't bear to be on her own, especially at night, so for months we would all sleep together in one big bed. Even after Angel and Lily moved into their own rooms, Ilas still slept across the foot of my bed. She'd curl up and... and..." Deborah's hiccups descended into a full blown storm of tears and I held her, not speaking, until she recovered herself a little.

Once she had calmed I handed her a tissue and waited until she had blown her red nose, before I said softly, "I can understand why being alone frightened her so much. If I ever lost you..." My throat closed and I couldn't say more, just held my wife as tightly as I could until we had both recovered some composure.

With one final huge sniff, Deborah sat up and rubbed at her face with her knuckles, reminding me irresistibly of how Marcus had looked when he was about four.

"OK, I've got to pull myself together and get on with things. Ilas would be the first to tell me to stop being a cry baby. Vya and Ilori are going to need all of us to help them through this. I want to see Lily and make sure she's OK, then I want to see Angel, because we can help each other, then we go and do what we can for the children, OK?"

My wife looked so determined I couldn't help but laugh at her. "Yes, ma'am! But let's take it slowly. You're still not 100% yourself, you know. That damned thing nearly killed you on its way out. And there's still one question you haven't answered. How are you still sending? I thought the Vorlon told us you'd lose your powers if it left you?"

Deborah's face was grim and I felt a ripple of her bitterness as she sent her emotion.

"The Vorlon lied. It lied and lied and lied."

2nd June 2284

Lily came to the memorial service in a wheelchair, but she insisted on attending, despite both John and Luke's reservations. I heard her muttering fiercely at Luke as he wheeled her into the Landing Bay, "I am NOT staying in Medbay while the rest of you are down here. I'm fine. I promise I won't try to get out of this damned wheelchair, so just leave me be and keep pushing."

I bit my lip to stop from smiling at how ferocious she sounded. If she didn't get her way, I was sure someone was going to get bitten, and I was going to stay far enough away to make sure it wasn't me.

With my arm around Deborah I moved us both until we stood the other side of Lily from Jack and Angel, who were quietly watching the preparations for the service. Both Jack and I knew what to expect, but I heard him whispering to Angel what was about to happen, just as I had told Deborah earlier, in our quarters.

"Earthforce memorial services are non-denominational, and they try to satisfy the requirements of all beliefs and all species. Just a roll call of the names of the lost, commending their spirits to the deities they believed in or the universe at large. Very simple, very dignified."

I saw Angel swallow and nod, gripping Jack's hand tightly as he stood next to her. For once, Angel wasn't dressed in her usual vibrant red. Like my wife, she was in black from head to foot, dressed simply and less provocatively than usual, out of respect for the occasion.

When I had first seen Lily being wheeled into the landing bay I had assumed for a moment she was still in her Medbay nightgown, but then I realized her white outfit represented the color of mourning in whatever culture she recalled from her childhood. Luke was also in white to respect his wife's beliefs, as were their children who had followed Luke and Lily in.

During the previous few days those of us up on our feet had been busy. Deborah had spent time with her sisters while I had conferred with John in his bed in Medbay. Jack, Ivanova and Marcus had joined us there, and we had spent time planning what action we should take in relation to the Nabulans.

Once we had arrived at a conclusion Ivanova had contacted Delenn and proposed our plan to blockade the Nabulans. This had been thought necessary after John revealed some details he'd picked up from the Shadow Hybrid pilot just before her ship was destroyed. It appeared that our old friends the Drakh had been supplying the Nabulans with weapons technology for years and encouraging them to attack vessels that came into their vicinity. The Shadow Hybrid had been sent by the Drakh to help out in the battle during which they'd expected to be able to take out the Excalibur, which had been the bane of their existence for many a long year.

Thanks to the sisters, the Drakh plan had come to nothing, but we were still watchful. In due course, we would also have to deal with the Drakh once and for all, but that was for another day.

The rest of the time Deborah and I had available during the previous few days had been spent with Vya and Ilori. I had listened to Vya talk about his parents, his guilt and his worries about the future, while Deborah had tried to get Ilori to talk about anything at all. The little girl was shut tight as a clamshell, and although Deborah could feel her grief, we hadn't been able to get anything more from her than a grudging agreement that she should come to Earth and live with us, at least until Vya could sort out something more permanent for them both.

Vya was worried sick about his little sister and at one point had been proposing to leave the Rangers to look after her, but John, Ivanova, Marcus and I had all ganged up on him then, and dissuaded him. For the moment it was agreed that he would return to Minbar with Ivanova and her Whitestar.

A soft wave of music emerged from the walls around us and I recognized the Earthforce hymn, just as the doors to the landing bay opened once more. John entered, in full dress uniform, followed by his command crew. I gave silent thanks that my own days of having to wear dress uniform were over, as I was much more comfortable in the dark suit I was wearing with a black shirt underneath. Jack had chosen an almost identical outfit, which I guess just goes to show how similar we still are.

John moved slowly and carefully to a podium that had been set up at one end of the landing bay, with his command crew standing at attention in a row behind him. His movements were still slow as he recovered from his injuries, but he'd insisted that he was fit enough to carry out his duties in the memorial service, despite Ivanova's objections. Luke must have backed him up, as Ivanova had relented and allowed him to deliver the service, although John wouldn't be signed off fit for duty for another couple of days.

The music swelled, silencing the soft murmurings of the crowd that had gathered.

As I watched John, head bowed, preparing himself to read the roll call of the lost, I remembered all too many occasions when I had stood where he stood now. I didn't envy John the job of honoring our dead, nor of the letters he would be writing afterwards, to the relatives of the fallen. Each letter would refer to something personal about the crew member he had lost and each name would forever be engraved on his heart, just as far too many names were engraved on mine.

As many as possible of the Excalibur crew had been released for the memorial, while many of the crews of the surviving Whitestars had also shuttled over to join the service. Skeleton crews manned the bridges of all three ships, but we were still on full alert in case of attack from the planet below.

Such an attack was extremely unlikely as it seemed the Witches had been thorough in their destruction of the Nabulan fleet. As far as we could tell, there was no longer a single space-worthy vessel remaining on the planet. Nevertheless, we would have been foolish to let our guard down. The Nabulans weren't the only threat.

John's voice was amplified as he slowly began to read out the names of the lost. Far too many names, but only four caskets were laid in line by the force shield that kept the atmosphere inside the landing bay. Space battles leave few bodies. Most of our losses had been scattered across space, broken down into molecules or atoms. It's a clean way to die.

The four bodies in the caskets were Excalibur crew members who had lost their lives aboard the ship. They would be expelled into space at the end of the service, and the Whitestars would fire on them, cremating them instantly. The Excalibur had performed the same service for the dead crew of the Whitestars the day before.

John's voice rolled on, telling the names of those who had given their lives to save the rest of us. He read the names in the order of their spelling in English, with no distinction for species, sex or rank. That was unimportant now. All that mattered was that they had died in service.

Dureena's name came early in the list and I felt my throat close at the memories her name brought flooding back to me. I would miss the little Zanderi thief who had become a daughter to me.

Deborah squeezed my hand as she felt my grief, and I then squeezed hers in return as Ilas' name was read out. I looked at her quickly and saw that tears were rolling down



her cheeks, but no expression showed on her frozen face. Deborah had locked her face, refusing to show the world her pain, but her tears were beyond her control. Next to us, Jack held Angel tightly as the raven haired witch sobbed for her lost sister, and beyond them, Luke held Lily's hand tightly, as the tiny red-head also wept.

I looked across Lily to where Ilori and Vya stood, next to their Aunt's wheelchair, with their cousins standing behind them to give them moral support.

Ilori was weeping softly, but she held herself together, dignified in the face of her appalling losses. Vya stood at her side, his arm around his little sister, trying to give her comfort that he needed so desperately himself. I saw that Ivanova and Marcus had stood on the other side of the grieving siblings and knew that Vya would receive comfort from the presence of his Entil'zha.

Max's name came later in the roll and again I was swamped with memories of times we had spent together. Times when I'd wanted to strangle him and times when I had been grateful for his generosity. I would miss him, too.

The last name that caused my eyes to close in pain was that of Trace Miller. Everyone on the Excalibur would miss his humor and his voice. I felt Deborah squeeze my hand again, and a gentle ripple of love washed through me, erasing the pain and replacing it. I knew then that life goes on. That no matter how much we had lost, we still had more than many will ever have. That old poem so beloved by Jeff Sinclair came to mind: "Though much is taken, much abides;"

Somehow we would get through this and we would help Vya and Ilori do the same.

The service was soon over after that, the caskets pushed through the force field and out into space where the Whitestars gave the fallen their final salute in a blast of their guns.

The crowd in Landing Bay dispersed slowly and quietly, some weeping, some comforting their friends. Marcus and Ivanova stopped to bid us farewell, knowing that we wouldn't see them again before we departed. Both were solemn, but I couldn't miss the underlying happiness both felt at their reunion. Ivanova looked ten years younger than when we'd arrived at Nabula, lines of age erased from her face by her joy at Marcus' return. It was good to know that something positive had come out of the Nabulan mess.

I turned to see G'Tan and No'Kar standing behind me, waiting for an opportunity to speak. The big Narn nodded with great solemnity and said quietly, "A sad day for us all, but they died bravely. That is how we should all hope to die."

I didn't like to contradict him and tell him that I never planned on dying at all, regardless of how it happened! I nodded back with equal solemnity and looked around as people started to leave. "Where's Harry?"

G'Tan answered me with a gentle smile. "He stayed on board the Angel's Rest. Harry doesn't like crowds and Angel didn't want Baby left alone."

I couldn't help but chuckle at this; Angel's pet's well-being was always high on her list of priorities. Well, I'd better get used to having Baby around again soon, as we'd agreed that Jack and Angel

would take Deborah and me back to Earth while the Excalibur stayed in orbit above Nabula, making sure the planet had no more nasty surprises for its neighbors until the blockade could be put in place.

Some in small groups and some alone, eventually everyone left the Landing Bay, until only Deborah and I remained, looking through the force field out into space and the stars beyond.

I hugged my best girl and kissed her gently on the forehead, whispering, "Time to go home."

Deborah nodded and wiped her tears away, sniffing then saying, "Yes. I miss the children terribly and we have to help Ilori. Let's go home. Things will be better there."

It sounded like a good idea, but life never works out the way you expect.

4th September 2284

I sat on the bench at the top of the hill behind our house in Cornwall, working on breathing slowly and carefully, knowing that Deborah was observing me to make sure I hadn't overstretched myself on the way up. This wasn't my first walk up the hill but it was the first time I'd attempted the ascent without rest stops on the way. I focused on my breathing for a few moments, gradually feeling each breath come more steadily, and the pain in my chest slowly easing. I'd been right when I'd told my wife that I was ready for this.

She hadn't wanted me to make the climb quite so soon, but I'd insisted. For a while we'd both got stubborn and it had looked like it was going to end in one of our occasional but spectacular disagreements-OK a knock-down, drag out fight. But before we went right over the top, Deborah had taken a deep breath, closed her eyes, and said, "OK, we'll give it a try, but if you get too tired, we stop, OK?" Of course, I'd agreed and of course, I'd had no intention of stopping.

My first walk up the hill had been three weeks earlier. It had been slow and painful, interrupted by numerous stops to catch my breath, leaning heavily on Deborah on one side of me, and John on the other. My old XO had recovered quickly from his injuries in the battle above Nabula, leaving him free to help me up the hill, while Luke had supported Lily. Her legs had been out of casts for a while, but she was still using crutches to get about and the ascent had been nearly as hard for her as it had been for me.

A little way behind Luke and Lily, my son Marcus helped support Jack, who was in just as bad a way as I was. I'm not sure why Jack needed Marcus' help as Angel had supported Jack's other side, and I would have thought she could have used her telekinesis to waft us all up the hill if she'd wanted. I could only guess that her powers still weren't quite back to normal. As we walked-staggered-up the hill, I'd heard Angel telling Jack softly that he was a fool and he shouldn't be out of bed. Deborah has said pretty much the same thing to me, but at least she'd said it in private before we'd left the house. I'd told her the same thing I'd then heard Jack telling Angel, "I'm not going to miss this. Vya needs all of his family with him today."

Which brought us to the last two groups in our little procession. Vya had followed Marcus, Jack and Angel, walking with support from G'Tan and No'Kar. To be honest, I don't think Vya needed

their support; they were more of an honor guard for the young shape-shifter and what he carried. Vya had taken the appearance of an adult male Zanderi, in honor of his mother's species. The other children, along with Harry and Baby, completed the procession. Dasha, Faylinn, Mattie and Naima had each carried a small rucksack filled with rocks. Harry had carried a very large backpack indeed, filled to the top with stones. I'd watched G'Tan and No'Kar lift the bag onto his back and it had taken the two of them to raise it. I have no idea how Harry made it up that hill with his load, but he did.

Vya had carried a small cask, which contained Ilori's ashes.

I've lost a lot of people over the years; after watching the Cerberus destroyed I'd thought that nothing could be worse, but I'd been wrong. Ilori's death had nearly killed me. Given the state I was in at the time, it wouldn't have taken much.

The sickness started on the way back from Nabula. Deborah and I started to cough in our cabin on the Angel's Rest, and we both had increasing difficulty breathing. Then Jack, Angel, G'Tan and No'Kar started coughing too. By the time we got back to Earth we were in a pretty bad way, as Harry was the only person on board unaffected by the sickness. Harry never got sick because Angel had ordered him to stay in his cabin with Baby and not to come out. Harry isn't as much of a fool as he sometimes looks and acts and he'd obeyed his orders to the letter. I dread to think what that cabin smelled like by the time we arrived on Earth.

It was tragic that Ilori hadn't been as good at doing what she was told and staying away from those of us who were sick. She had come with us on Jack and Angel's ship, and when we got sick, she had tried to help us all, nursing us and bringing us food, despite our warnings to stay away. After a couple of days she too had started to cough.

When we'd got back to Earth, Jack had somehow-I have no idea how-managed to land the ship and call for help. We were all put directly into quarantine until the local medical services could figure out what was wrong. Ilori, Jack and I were worst affected, G'Tan and No'Kar least. Those Narns are tough bastards and they fought off the infection faster than the rest of us.

The next few weeks are a blur; I really don't remember much except for some very bad dreams, and the sound of my own coughing as I tried to relocate my lungs to the outside of my chest. I was aware of Deborah's voice at times, telling me that she'd kill me if I dared to die on her. I would have laughed but all I could do was cough some more instead.

I found out later that Deborah and Angel had fought off the illness with nearly as much resilience as G'Tan and No'Kar, and if you ever tell those sisters that I compared them to Narns, I'll come after you with my PPG.

The medics on Earth eventually figured out that we'd all inhaled some evil little fungal spores during our visits with the Nabulans on the only continent they inhabited. Only those of us who had visited that continent were initially affected. The heat and humidity had incubated the spores in our lungs with every breath we'd taken in that godforsaken city. When Luke had scanned us all for the Drakh plague, the scans hadn't picked up the spores as they weren't viral and at that stage they hadn't started to spread. But once they started to multiply, we all went down with pneumonia, and even worse, we started to exhale spores with every breath. That's how poor Ilori got infected.

The pneumonia shouldn't have killed her. Maybe if Alwyn and Sarah had been around it wouldn't have killed her. Deborah told me later that she'd tried and tried to contact Alwyn, but had failed to get through to either him or Sarah.

I think deep down, Ilori didn't want to live. She'd lost all three of her parents in the space of a day, and she was drowning in sorrow. When the news had come through to the hospital that Vya had also gone down with the sickness on his way back to Minbar, I think Ilori lost the will to live. She died two weeks after we'd got back to Earth.

Fortunately for Vya, the Medbay facilities on the Whitestar he was travelling on were as good as you'd expect of a Minbari equipped ship, and they had quickly spotted the cause of the illness and isolated, then treated him. Similarly, on the Excalibur Luke had identified the symptoms being displayed by the Marines who had accompanied Jack, Vya and me on the first trip down, and they'd been quarantined and treated quickly enough to prevent any more deaths. It was only on The Angel's Rest that we hadn't had the medical facilities available to prevent the deterioration we'd all suffered nor had we been able to prevent the spread of the infection to Ilori. Much later Luke figured out the reason Vya hadn't got sick during his undercover investigations on the main continent of Nabula. The spores were seasonal. We had just had the bad luck to arrive there when they were in full spate.

We'd had to delay Ilori's funeral service until her extended family was well enough to attend. Vya had come to Earth as soon as he'd been pronounced fit to travel. Deborah and Angel had meantime arranged the cremation of Ilori's remains, in accordance with Zanderi customs. Jack and I were still pretty much out of things at that stage, but we'd slowly fought our way back to something resembling health, and we'd just been discharged from the hospital when Vya arrived on Earth, having been brought by the Excalibur. Everyone descended on our house in Cornwall and at any other time, it would have been a massive party, but on this occasion our sorrows kept us from enjoying the brief reunion.

The funeral procession had been a Zanderi custom, where the ashes of the departed were taken to a high place, and a cairn of rocks built over them by their family. So we'd all struggled up the hill behind the house, placed the urn with Ilori's ashes in a spot where there was a wonderful view of the sea, and started to build my honorary grand-daughter a memorial cairn. It had been a subdued little ceremony, with each of us speaking a few words of remembrance for all those we had lost. I don't remember what I said, just the taste of bile in my mouth as I spoke. My words were so inadequate they'd literally made my gorge rise.

The second time I'd climbed that hill, a week before, I'd only needed Deborah's arm to help me, but I'd needed to stop several times to catch my breath on the ascent. Deborah had carried a bag with a few more rocks, and we'd led some workmen up with us, showing them where we wanted the bench placed, just a couple of meters away from the cairn, looking out to sea.

Once the bench was secured in place and the workmen had gone, Deborah and I had sat there, both in tears for the loss of that beautiful girl and her three parents. It was somehow so wrong that we had seen both Ilori's birth and her death. Her loss made all the pain and sacrifice that Dureena had gone through to give Ilori life seem pointless. But I guess the happiness that Ilori had given her

mother during their all too brief time together made the pain and suffering of her birth worthwhile. So why did she have to die so young? I have no answer to that question.

On this, our third visit to the site of Ilori's memorial cairn, both Deborah and I carried a few small rocks with us, so once my breathing had settled back to normal, I stood and walked over to the small cairn and placed my new contributions on top. Deborah rose and stood beside me, placing her stones around mine. Then she reached and held my hand, sending a wave of love mixed with sadness and remorse.

I turned and took her into my arms, holding her tightly, feeling her warmth against my chest, trying to let go of my own grief and guilt. I knew Deborah shared those feelings as she had cried in my arms night after night, telling me how she felt she had let Ilas down; she hadn't taken care of Ilori as she should. I had tried to comfort her, but it was difficult when I felt the same way.

We both felt we'd betrayed the trust that Dureena, Ilas and Max had placed in us. We'd broken our promise to them. Deborah and I have this in common; we are neither of us good at forgiving ourselves. Deborah is better than I am at forgiving others, of course. Forgiveness really isn't one of my strengths. But now the medics had said I was fit to travel again, it was time for me to keep another promise I'd made long ago. When Deborah's tears dried at last, I said to her quietly, "I need to go to Minbar. Will you come with me?"

Deborah looked up at me and smiled, "You don't think I'd let you go anywhere without me, do you? The children will both be back in school next week, so of course I'll come with you." She didn't even ask why I needed to go. Despite her eternal curiosity, she didn't care about the reason for the trip. All she wanted was to be with me. I pulled her tightly to me again, thanking the universe that she was my wife and that she loved me. I don't deserve her, but then again, she's never wanted to be deserved.

23rd September 2284

Deborah and I sat on the sofa in Delenn's living quarters, with Delenn and Ivanova sitting opposite us. We'd arrived on Minbar two days before and had spent the time before our meeting trying to adjust to the time zone of the city of Tuzanor, and the shorter day length on Minbar. It was always a delight and an honor to be allowed to meet Delenn in her personal rooms, and the addition of Ivanova to the party made it even more of a privilege. These were two very busy people, so them both finding time to see us was unexpected. I'd messaged ahead that I was coming, so I'd hoped I'd get to see Delenn reasonably quickly (after all, she was the nearest thing I had to a boss) but I wasn't expecting Ivanova's presence. But there was no doubt having her there could make what I wanted to do easier.

After offering refreshments, Delenn said, "Your message said you had a favor to ask of me, Matthew. Tell me what I can do to help you."

I smiled and nodded my thanks, took a deep breath and launched myself into my request.

"Back in '73 you may remember coming to our rescue at Epsilon Delta 457." It had been one hell of a battle and we'd reached a stalemate, with Deborah, Lily and Angel blocking the combined efforts

of an old Psi Corps ship full of rogue human telepaths who were trying to take us over, while the Excalibur had tried to hold off one of the Shadow hybrids that had been attacking us. They'd been wearing us down when Delenn arrived with fleet of over 40 Whitestars, each packed with Minbari telepaths who had overwhelmed the rogue Psi Corps ship. That had given me the time and space I'd needed to destroy the Shadow hybrid.

Delenn smiled back at me. "I could hardly forget that day. It was the only time I saw the Excalibur use the might of its main gun. It was an impressive sight."

I bit my lip to quash any double entendres that might have sprung to mind relating to the Excalibur's main gun. My restraint had nothing to do with the hard dig in the ribs that Deborah chose to give me at that point. For a woman whose body is mostly formed of delicious curves, my wife has surprisingly sharp elbows.

I went on, "A couple of months after that battle and the subsequent interrogation of the Psi Corps telepaths, I got a call from Marcus Cole." I nodded to Ivanova who had so recently been reunited with her husband. He does have a bad habit of getting himself killed or lost, but fortunately my wife and her sisters also have a habit of finding him and bringing him back to life. It's a habit of theirs that Susan Ivanova seems to appreciate. I'm in two minds about it myself.

"Marcus brought us up to date on what had happened to Talia Winters." Ivanova leaned forward in her seat, frowning at my mention of that name. I'd been told that she and Talia had been 'close' before Talia had effectively been mind-wiped by the Psi Corps, with her original personality-the one that had been 'close' to Susan-being replaced by someone very unpleasant indeed. The new Talia had become the main liaison between Psi Corps, the Shadows and the raiders whose attacks on ISA ships were so disruptive.

"Marcus told me that the Minbari telepaths had been successful in wiping the 'new' Talia personality, and that a recording of her old personality had been saved and used successfully to bring back the 'old' Talia. Did I get that right? All these new and old Talia's gets confusing. I agreed with Marcus at the time when he said he wished the new one had used a different name!"

Ivanova gave a low laugh, "It would have been easier. However, for those of us who knew her before the Psi Corps changed her, there is really only one Talia."

Delenn nodded her agreement. "The original Talia was well known to all of us who worked on Babylon 5 at that time, and she was liked and respected. Even Susan, who was not enamoured of the Psi Corps..." Ivanova interrupted with a very eloquent snort. Delenn smiled and went on, "...even Susan eventually came to accept Talia."

If what I'd read between the lines when Marcus Cole had briefed John and me back in '73 was correct, Ivanova had done a damn sight more than 'accept' Talia. I ignored my internal lascivious speculations and carried on. "Marcus told us that Talia was staying on Minbar to work as a commercial telepath, and I'm hoping she's still around."

I looked at Susan and Delenn enquiringly. Ivanova was frowning, but Delenn was polite enough as she asked, "And why do you need to know this, Matthew and why now?"

This was the tough part. I took a deep breath and said, "Because when Marcus called at that time, he asked me to do something and I refused. I'm not proud of myself for doing that, but I still had some major issues then about the loss of the Cerberus and the ship responsible for her destruction." That was the understatement of the century. I'd been haunted and obsessed with that loss, to an extent that only Deborah truly appreciated. I felt her hand touch mine and she sent a tiny wave of love and reassurance that helped me continue.

"Marcus told me that Talia didn't remember her actions as the 'new' personality, but she knew she had done some terrible things, and she wanted to speak to John Matheson and me, to apologize and get our forgiveness. I still don't know what John decided, but I refused to speak to her and I had absolutely no intention of forgiving her for having conspired to kill me, my family and my crew. As I say, I'm not exactly proud of that but I had my reasons and they seemed good to me at the time."

Ivanova nodded, "Understandable. I didn't know that Marcus had asked you to do that. If I'd known, I'd have told him not to bother. I couldn't have forgiven her either, if I hadn't known her before we lost her."

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least someone in that room understood me. I suspected Deleenn and Deborah (who had previously known nothing of all this) were quietly appalled at my unwillingness to talk to Talia at that time. John Sheridan had shaken hands with a mind-wiped murderer; a man who had killed Sheridan's friend. Well, I never claimed to be half the man that he had been. Neither did I aspire to match Deleenn or Deborah in their generosity of spirit. But Ivanova and I were old war horses. We understood each other.

Deleenn looked at me curiously and asked, "Has your position changed now? Do you now wish to speak to Talia? And can you now forgive her?"

I nodded. "Yes. I've been thinking about this since Nabula and two things have changed as a result of that mission. The first is that I now know that I've had my revenge on the ship that destroyed the Cerberus. The Shadow hybrid that attacked us there was responsible for the loss of my ship and all my friends and colleagues. We destroyed that hybrid and I finally had the resolution I'd been seeking for so long. And it didn't help as much as I'd thought."

I leaned forward to take a sip of water from the glass on the table in front of me and then went on, "I learned that day that the telepath who had been integrated into that Shadow ship was just as much as victim as the Cerberus and everyone on her. She'd been used and abused in the worst ways anyone could ever imagine, and driven completely insane. She wasn't responsible for her actions. The responsibility lay with her abusers, the Shadows. And they have left this galaxy, so I can't make them answer for their atrocities, any more than I can make the Vorlons pay for what they did to my wife and her sisters."

I reached out and gripped Deborah's hand tightly. "And if I can't consider that telepath as responsible for the destruction of the Cerberus, how can I make Talia Winters guilty of the crimes committed when her personality had been wiped and she was being controlled by the Shadows and their successors, just as that Shadow ship telepath had been?"

It was a rhetorical question of course. Talia was no more responsible for her crimes than that poor, mad telepath. The responsible parties had left and there was no way now to make them pay. Perhaps making them leave us alone was enough and John Sheridan and Delenn had done that. Even if it wasn't enough, there really was nothing more I could do about it. I wasn't going to go hunting Shadows and Vorlons beyond the rim. Deborah wouldn't let me.

"So I would like to speak to Talia and tell her that she doesn't have to carry any guilt for what her alternative personality did, so there is nothing to forgive her for. But if she still feels the need for my forgiveness, she can have it." It was done. I'd finally got it out. It felt like laying down a burden I'd been carrying for too long.

I stood on the balcony of Delenn's quarters, looking out at one of the most beautiful views in the universe. I remembered a time when I had stood in the same place with John Sheridan and I had asked him if he ever got used to that beauty. Sheridan had answered "Every time I step out on this balcony, it astounds me. I don't think I'll ever be able to take it for granted. This place is just so damned beautiful that it constantly takes you by surprise." The crystal spires and waterfalls of Tuzanor were still stunning, but the world was a poorer place now that John Sheridan had left it.



I took a deep breath and turned to Delenn, who stood beside me, also gazing out at the view. "So what did you want to talk to me about that you couldn't say in front of Deborah?"

Ivanova had left us a few moments before, taking my wife with her, saying that Deborah should come with her to meet Talia Winters, then she could catch up with Marcus Cole, both of whom were currently in residence in the Entil'zha's quarters in Tuzanor. Deborah had glanced from Ivanova to Delenn and back, narrowing her eyes, then accepting Ivanova's invitation graciously. Before she left she had leaned in to kiss my cheek and whispered, "They don't want me around here just now. You can tell me what they really want later." And she says I'm nosy.

Delenn smiled and waved me toward the seat that stood at the back of the balcony. As we sat I worked out that the balcony was facing east, and I wondered if Delenn ever came out at dawn to watch the sunrise. It would be spectacular from this spot.

Once we were settled, Delenn said, "Entil'zha Ivanova and I had originally planned to speak to you both together. There was a subject I wanted to discuss with you, but Susan had some..." She hesitated as if seeking the appropriate word, then went on, "...reservations and she felt your wife's input might help. However, our earlier conversation had effectively resolved her concerns, so we decided it would be best if I spoke to you alone, then you could speak to your wife later."

All that without saying a word to each other! I'd found out a few years before that Ivanova had very low level telepathic skills, but it sounded as if those skills had increased in the intervening period. Again I wondered just how close she and Talia Winters had become and whether their relationship had anything to do with Ivanova's enhanced abilities.

But before I could satisfy my own curiosity, Delenn continued, "You may not realise how much finding Marcus Cole has been appreciated by Susan and me."

I chuckled, "I think we got a pretty good idea of how much Ivanova 'appreciated' getting Marcus back when she jumped him in the Excalibur landing bay and damn near had her wicked way with him there and then on the deck."

Delenn smiled, "Well, I may not have 'appreciated' his return quite so vigorously, but I can assure you that finding Marcus Cole was important to me, also. Marcus is very dear to me. He once nearly gave his life defending me from a Minbari warrior."

Now that was a story I'd like to hear more of sometime, but for the moment I just said, "It was pure luck. If we hadn't found the ruins close to where Marcus and his crew had taken shelter with the locals, the chances of our finding him any other way would have been slim to none."

Delenn nodded, "I know, but serendipity should be cherished and celebrated, so you have my thanks, as well as Susan's. And we have identified a suitable planet for those 'locals' to take up residence. Vya is with them now, making sure they are settled comfortably and have everything they need. But this was not what I wished to discuss with you. Marcus' return has been the precipitating factor in a change which I had not envisaged having to make so soon. Entil'zha Ivanova has indicated to me that she wishes to step down from her position, and return to private life. She wants to spend time with Marcus, helping him to reintegrate into his previous life and to help him to adjust to the changes to that life that have occurred in his absence."

A faint smile played across Delenn's mouth as she went on, "I'm sure you were aware of the references made to Susan's relationship with Talia, and you have no doubt reached your own conclusions as to the depth of that relationship, which has been both personal and professional."

My mind was reeling at this point, with this flood of information. Ivanova stepping down? She and Talia being in a 'relationship'? Whatever that relationship might be, it hadn't assuaged Ivanova's essential loneliness after losing Marcus, as my wife had made clear to me after that first dinner party months before on the Excalibur. But whatever it was, it seemed Marcus Cole was having to adjust to it. I couldn't help but wonder how Marcus would cope with being the filling in a sandwich of two telepaths. They were both beautiful women, and many men would envy him, but I wasn't sure that I was one of them. You can have too much of a good thing. I could only hope that Marcus didn't agree.

While all this was running through my mind, Delenn had continued to speak, "I therefore need to find a replacement for Susan, and as you can imagine, that is not an easy task."

"Damn right it's not! Susan Ivanova is one hell of a tough act to follow at the best of times, and her predecessors were even tougher!" I couldn't help my outburst at that point.

Delenn smiled again at my reference to her own period holding the position of Entil'zha. She had stepped down when she had become President of the ISA, and had been succeeded by John Sheridan, who had passed the baton to Ivanova when he left Minbar for the last time. OK, when he died. I still found it hard to accept that my hero was dead.

I went on, "How in hell do you plan on finding someone to follow the three of you? I can't even imagine where you would start looking."

Delenn nodded. "It will be difficult. Susan's replacement must have extensive experience of dealing with all the races of the ISA, something that the three of us who have recently performed the duties of Entil'zha had from our time on Babylon 5. The new replacement must also have strong leadership abilities and they must have one other thing that has probably not been so obvious to anyone outside the Anla'shok."

This was getting interesting. For once in my life I kept my mouth shut and listened.

"When John and I were each Entil'zha, we always relied on the services of a Minbari telepath, who accompanied us during all our discussions and missions. That telepath was able to tell us how the people we dealt with were feeling and what they were thinking. We could always tell when someone lied to us, or prevaricated about their true goals and objectives."

I was grateful that there are no small flying insects inhabiting the Tuzanor area, as my mouth was wide open at that point. After a few moments I remember to breathe again, shut my mouth, swallowed, then stammered, "But isn't that in breach of all regulations for telepaths?"

Delenn shook her head. "Not on Minbar, nor on any planet other than Earth. It is an accepted practice elsewhere for leaders to be accompanied by telepaths, for their protection and to ensure that they truly understand the wants and needs of their people."

As my very English wife would say, my flabber was well and truly ghasted.

Delenn waited until I had got my face back under control. At that moment you would never have guessed that I'm usually a damn fine poker player with a face to match. The President of the ISA had completely blown me away.

After a few false starts, I eventually managed to stutter, "You say you and John used Minbari telepaths. What about Ivanova?"

With a rather naughty smile, Delenn asked, "Can you really not guess, Matthew?"

It hit me like a thunderclap. Talia Winters. Of course. That was the job she'd been doing since Ivanova had become Ranger One. No one questioned her being by Ivanova's side, because of their personal relationship. But when Ivanova's own limited telepathic skills were insufficient, she had the abilities of a teep who was at least a P5 and possibly higher at her command. No wonder the three modern Entil'zha's had been so successful. They could literally read any audience's mind, if not personally then by their companions' skills.



I shook my head in disbelief, but had to ask, "So why don't you just appoint a telepath as Entil'zha? Or would that be too obvious?"

Delenn nodded. "The races of the ISA are not ready for that, but that will come in time. In the meantime we need a new Ranger One who can prepare for that day. Matthew, can you think of someone who has all the qualities and experience we need, and who also has, if not a telepath, at least an empath constantly at his side?" She smiled at me in a kindly way, and I wondered if she could possibly mean what I thought she meant? I really wasn't having one of my brighter days.

"Me? You want me to be Entil'zha? You have to be joking!" I started to laugh but I have to admit there was a ring of hysteria in the sound I was making. I got myself under control when I saw Delenn frowning at me.

"Is this really such a surprise, Matthew?" She asked.

Well, yes it was. It was an enormous surprise. Me, Matthew Gideon, the man who had nearly been drummed out of Earthforce for carrying on rigged poker games. The man who had carried around an illicit piece of alien technology for years that had caused devastation to so many people I knew. The man who nearly lost the cure to the Drakh plague on his way home to Earth. The man who had well and truly fucked up the mission to Centauri and had nearly lost his life and his wife as a result. And the President of the ISA, the person I respected most in the galaxy now John Sheridan was dead, wanted ME to be Ranger One for the Anla'shok. Had Delenn completely lost her marbles?

I stalled for time by asking, "You said Ivanova had reservations about this. What were they?"

I had a few reservations myself. Like what were they doing even thinking about appointing a double-talking, suspicious, second-guessing individual like me to such a role? Did they even know who I was?

"There is a further quality that is essential for the role, above and beyond those I mentioned earlier. Susan and I both know that you have the leadership experience and the knowledge of the needs and issues of the various races of the ISA from the time you Captained the Excalibur." Delenn spoke seriously.

She had that right at least. During the years I led a multi-species crew I had learned just about every foible and irritating habit of every species, and figured out ways to get them to work together without rubbing each other up the wrong way too often. Half of my life on board the Excalibur had been spent working out ways to stop my crew murdering each other. And I had to agree that having Deborah at my side, telling me the crew were really feeling had been a huge help. I was beginning to see why Delenn and Ivanova were considering me for the role. I remembered once saying "I'm not subtle. I'm not pretty, and I'll piss off a lot of people along the way. But I'll get the job done." So if Delenn wanted the job done, maybe I wasn't such a dreadful choice. Maybe.

OK, who am I kidding? Really? Me? The eccentric Captain who gambled and cheated? This had to be some kind of joke, and any minute now someone was going to pop their head out onto the balcony and yell 'April Fool!' But it wasn't April and the Minbari don't do pranks, so maybe...

I had to ask, "So what is this quality that Ivanova obviously wasn't sure I have, and what changed her mind?"

Deleenn smiled that sweet smile of hers again. She really is a beautiful woman. "Compassion. Above all the Entil'zha needs compassion for the people who work for him or her and for the people of the ISA. I was sure you had that compassion, but Susan said your record showed more of a tendency for revenge than forgiveness. She thought perhaps your wife could influence you in the desired direction, but she wasn't sure."

I nodded. "Ivanova is right. I'm not the forgiving and forgetting type, and I've never turned the other cheek in my life. I'm much more likely to try and get my punch in first. And I nurse grudges better than anyone I know." I wanted Deleenn to know the truth about who I really was. This wasn't the time for hiding my worst traits.

"Yet you asked to meet Talia so you could tell her that she had done nothing to be guilty about and to forgive her if that is what she needed. Why would someone without compassion do that? Would someone without compassion have seen the telepath trapped in that Shadow ship-the telepath responsible for the deaths of so many of your friends-as a victim? I believe the correct expression is that you are 'selling yourself short', Matthew. You have more compassion than you are willing to admit. I already knew that, but Susan was convinced by your change of heart to Talia. And think about what I have said. I need someone in this role who can be successful in his own right, but who can also pave the way for the next Entil'zha, who should be a telepath. Who better than someone who has succeeded in that task before?"

For the second time in an hour, Deleenn had knocked the wind out of my sails. It was obvious what she was implying. If I took this job, when I was ready to hand over the reins, John Matheson would be the ideal candidate to succeed me. And just as he had on the Excalibur, I had no doubt he would make a better job of it than I would.

"So why not now? John Matheson has everything you need, and he's a telepath. No one could ever doubt his compassion." I had to know.

"It would be too soon. There are too many species who still don't accept telepaths in critical roles. Just as appointing John Matheson as Captain of the Excalibur was only possible once he had proved himself as your XO, so appointing him as Ranger One would be premature at this time. He cannot command the Rangers' loyalty until you have shown them he is worthy of their respect. I am sure there will be ample opportunities for you to have the Rangers work closely with the Excalibur, which will demonstrate all Captain Matheson's qualities to them."

I shook my head in amazement. "You really have it all worked out, don't you? So you just want me as a caretaker, as a sort of night watchman, holding the position until John is ready." I have to admit to feeling rather deflated. It didn't feel good to be wanted, not in my own right, but as someone who could smooth the path for the future occupant of the role, no matter how worthy that occupant might be.

Deleenn turned on me, her eyes flashing with an anger I had never seen before. "No! We need you Matthew Gideon, the man who saved Earth, the man who Captained the Excalibur on countless successful missions, the man who brought more new races into the ISA than anyone else. The man

those races respect and admire. That is the man we need for this role now and for as long as you want it. But when you are ready to step down, however long or short a time that is, you will have prepared the way for your successor. That is what every good leader does, and you are no exception, Matthew. You are a great leader, and you are the man I want in this job now." By the time she finished I could feel myself blushing. Was that what she really thought of me? How could I tell her that she was over-rating me? How could I tell her that I wasn't the man she thought I was? I just didn't know where to begin.

Before I could marshal my thoughts enough to speak, Deleenn stood, and looking down at me, continued, "The offer is yours to refuse. I know you will need to discuss this with your wife as it will entail a move to live at the Ranger compound here on Minbar. She will be returning shortly with Susan, Marcus and Talia. Forgive me, but I have other duties to attend, but please stay and enjoy the view until the others return."

And with that she was gone, her robes swishing behind her as she left the balcony. I sat wondering what I should do. As always when I'm not sure of myself, I thought, "I'll talk it over with Deborah and see what she thinks."

Then I put it all out of my mind and did as I was told. I enjoyed the view.

7th December 2284

Looking in the mirror at the new costume that had been provided for me to wear at the ceremonies that day, I wondered whether there was any way I could change my mind. Have you seen what the Entil'zha gets dressed up in for formal events? I looked ridiculous. The only positive was that I didn't look like a bellhop.

I told myself that I wouldn't have to dress up like this very often and it was no worse than an Earthforce dress uniform. At least it didn't itch. But it was hot and heavy, and the weather outside was warm for a spring day. I knew by the end of the day I would be hot, sweaty and grouchy.

I had been on Minbar for six weeks by this time, and Deborah had joined me two weeks before. I had come on ahead to start the handover process from Ivanova, while Deborah had stayed on Earth to close down the house, put our affairs in order and pack what we needed to bring to Minbar. We had offered Marcus and Mattie the chance to come with us and finish their education on Minbar, and I know Marcus had been very tempted, but in the end they had both decided to stay on at their school, boarding in term time and joining us on Minbar for holidays. We hoped that some holidays we'd be able to get back to Earth to spend with them there, and sometimes we might be able to meet up elsewhere. Mattie had put her vote in for meeting on Disneyplanet at every opportunity.

When Deborah had arrived, Ivanova had vacated the Entil'zha's house at the Anla'shok training compound in the hills above Tuzanor and handed it over to us. We'd been delighted to find it very comfortably furnished and well equipped. We'd been particularly happy about the very large, comfortable bed in the main bedroom. After four weeks apart, Deborah and I made very effective use of that bed as well as virtually every other item of furniture in the house. Yes, and that included the sturdy light fitting in my study, which while it wasn't a chandelier, had provided a

very satisfactory substitute. If you can't imagine how we used it, then you've led a sheltered life and you should get out more.

During my training period with Ivanova I'd learned that running the Rangers wasn't that dissimilar to running any large command. The key was to have enough controls in place to be able to spot when people weren't doing their job, but have things relaxed enough for people to be able to use their initiative and creativity to do their jobs well. It's a fine balance, but as far as I could see, Ivanova had it just about right. There wasn't much I wanted to change in the short term.

There were, however, a few things I did want to do in the near future. First was a personal visit to all the main Ranger bases, to meet as many Rangers as I could. Deborah would, of course, accompany me on that tour. I hadn't forgotten that back in '69 on my way back to Earth with the cure for the Drakh plague, we'd been betrayed by a Ranger who had been captured by the Drakh and had a 'Keeper' implanted in him. I wanted Deborah to be near every Ranger I could meet so she could tell me if we had any other spies in our midst. Ivanova had told me she had carried out a similar inspection when she took up the role of Ranger One, taking Talia with her, and they'd found nothing. That had only been three years before, but I wanted to be sure nothing had got into our ranks in the meantime.

And just in case we had been infiltrated, I remembered that the only way we'd been able to prevent the Keeper that had been attached to Angel on Centauri Prime from re-growing had been by using a transfusion of Technomage nanomites. So I wanted a Technomage handy just in case. The problem was that I seemed to have mislaid my own friendly member of that order. It had now been nine months since any of us had heard from Alwyn, Sarah and Jaysen. We were all getting concerned as they had never absented themselves for so long before. So the second thing I wanted to do was to put out a general alert for all Rangers to be on the lookout for a Technomage ship with golden dragons on its wings.

The third thing I wanted to do was to shake Marcus Cole's hand, warmly and really firmly, when I greeted him as his new boss. I know, I should be ashamed of myself, but I was really looking forward to that.

Being not entirely stupid, the fourth thing I wanted to do was to learn how to use the Denn'bok I had attached to my belt. I'd taken a couple of lessons in the art of Minbari pike fighting, but I knew I was nowhere near Marcus' standard. Until I was, I'd just hide behind Deborah. Marcus was far too much of a gentleman to hit a woman. Deborah would protect me. She liked my body just the way it was and didn't want Marcus Cole rearranging anything.

And the fifth thing... well, that could wait, as Deborah entered the room at that moment, and stood smiling at me as I screwed my face up at my image in the mirror.

"You looked very handsome before you started pulling faces that Mattie would be ashamed of." She laughed as she slid into my arms.

I held her tight, burying my head into the side of her neck, inhaling her perfume, and enjoying the feel of her in my arms. Four weeks apart had been far too long. After a few moments I stepped back, holding her at arm's length and admiring the view. She was wearing the same black trouser suit she had worn the first time she had met Delenn. It was formal but comfortable, and while it

covered her completely from neck to ankle, it did nothing to hide her wonderful curves. It took a lot of self-control to stop myself from ripping her clothes off to reveal those curves.

Deborah smiled at me as she felt my surge of lust, and whispered, "Down boy. We have a ceremony to attend and we don't have time. We have to walk to the Chapel today, no riding."

When Deborah had joined me two weeks before she had come with a lot of luggage and two large crates. One had held Oscar, our dog, who had come to live with us at the Ranger compound, and who was already being spoiled rotten by everyone whose path he crossed. As he was free to roam the entire compound this was pretty much everyone there. We'd had to explain the concept of a 'pet' to several of the member species, and to make it very very clear that Oscar was not available for snacking on if they got hungry. Deborah had spoken quite severely to some of the more carnivorous species, advising them that she would be very angry indeed if even one of Oscar's hairs went missing.

Rangers are not dumb. They got the message and now everyone doted on the dozy beast.

The second crate was even larger. This had contained my last birthday present from Deborah. A replica 1992 Kawasaki Ninja ZX-11 motorbike, made in limited numbers by Edgars' Industries. Yes, another one. We had left one behind on the Excalibur years before, so Deborah had finally bought me a replacement, had it assembled in secret, and it had been waiting for me when we had returned to Earth at the end of the previous September. I had only been able to use it for a few days, racing around the country lanes in Cornwall at a speed which I didn't even think of telling my wife about, before I had had to leave for Minbar. So Deborah had crated it up and brought it with her.

Traditionally, everyone got around the Ranger compound on foot. To hell with tradition, I was creating a new one. Rangers would just have to get used to seeing their Entil'zha zooming from place to place on a motorbike. Out of respect for the tranquillity of the compound, I had turned off the sound effects, which I found made it even more fun, as now no one could hear me coming up behind them. I'd streak past on my way to my next assignment, leaving Rangers keeling over from shock like ten-pins in my wake. Well, if they're that easy to startle they should think about a different career.

But today was all about tradition, so I had to leave my motorbike at home with the dog.

I held out my hand to my beautiful wife and we walked out of our new home toward the Chapel, where I was to be confirmed as the new Entil'zha of the Anla'shok

I guess you're wondering what the fifth thing was, aren't you? If you're not, then you haven't been paying attention and I suggest you go back to the start of the story and read it again.

For those of you who have been keeping your wits about you, the fifth thing I wanted to do after I officially started my new job should be obvious.

I planned to put out a high level alert to ALL Rangers, highest priority, Entil'zha's personal command. I wanted the Rangers to find Lucas Buck and hold him until I could get to wherever he

was. Then I would kill him.

I'm not quite the compassionate and forgiving man Deleenn thought I was. Not where Lucas Buck is concerned.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five A

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