

# *The Witches of Eriadne:*

## *Interlude Five A - Part 3: Lost in Space*

by *The Space Witches*



*A Nabulan*

### *Chapter 1*

3rd April 2284

*I opened the bedroom door quietly, not wanting to disturb the sleeper within. It was 2 a.m. and my wife doesn't enjoy being woken from a deep slumber. In fact, she can get downright grouchy if she doesn't get her full quota of sleep, and a grouchy Deborah isn't something a team of Rangers armed to the teeth would want to deal with, never mind a poor, defenseless retired starship Captain like me.*

*I guess I should have called on ahead and let her know I was coming home a day early, but I'd wanted to surprise her, and I hadn't planned on being quite so late. Problems at Heathrow Shuttle Port had held me up for a couple of hours--you would have thought they'd be used to Ranger ships arriving at short notice by now, wouldn't you?--so instead of arriving home in time for a late supper, I was now creeping into my bedroom in the early hours, like a burglar preparing to steal the family silver. Not that we have any family silver. Too much polishing.*

*It was no great surprise to see that my wife was deeply asleep, sprawled on her belly in her usual untidy fashion across her side of the bed, her long, blonde hair falling across her shoulders. The view wasn't quite as spectacular as normal, as she was wearing one of my t-shirts, which just about covered her beautiful butt. This left me with my usual muddle of mixed emotions.*

*On the one hand, I regretted the concealment of my second-favorite part of Deborah's anatomy. Her naked ass is one of the most glorious sights in the universe, and I selfishly revel in knowing that no one else is acquainted with that fact. On the other hand, I wish she'd wear something else, as her generous breasts--my favorite part of her anatomy, in case you were wondering--stretch the material out of shape, and when I next wear the t-shirt, I look like a hump-fronted whale. Yes, I know they're humpbacked, not hump-fronted. Just use your imagination.*

*On the third hand--you have a problem with three handed beings? That's very xenophobic of you. As I was saying, on the third hand, there's something very endearing about Deborah being unable to sleep without something of mine next to her skin. Of course, I would have preferred that something to be me, but occasionally duty calls, and I have to leave my home and wife for short periods.*

*On this occasion I had been to Minbar, but more on that later. For the moment, I stood in the bedroom doorway, the light spilling into the room from the hallway behind me, frowning. Why?*

*Because my wife was not alone.*

*That's the problem with surprises. Sometimes they don't turn out to be quite as pleasant as you expect. I certainly hadn't expected to find my side of our marital bed fully occupied.*

*I recognized the intruder immediately, and let out a soft sigh of disappointment. I thought he knew better. Hadn't I warned him before when he'd tried to encroach on my territory? It seemed that warnings weren't enough. More severe action would be called for. Of course, I blamed Deborah, too. She should know better. Just because I left her alone for a few nights, was no excuse for her bringing a substitute into her bed. And a pretty poor substitute at that.*

*I stepped into the room and moved silently over to my side of the bed, where I leaned forward and prodded the interloper gently in the shoulder. He let out a little grunt, but showed no sign of rousing, so I prodded him again. That did the trick. He slowly lifted his head from my pillow and opened his eyes, peering at me blearily.*

*When he saw who was standing there, the trespasser quickly became alert, and I swear his dark brown eyes filled with shame and remorse. Too late of course. He knew the rules, and he knew he'd gone too far. I pointed to the doorway and hissed through clenched teeth, "Out. You know damn well you're not allowed in here. We'll talk about this in the morning."*

*The gatecrasher hung his head in shame, peering up at me silently with those big brown eyes that he uses so often to get his own way with my wife. She's a sucker for warm brown eyes, of course, a fact that I often play on myself, but dammit, that's my trick, and no one else is allowed to take advantage of her like that.*

*I remained silently pointing at the door, and the intruder finally dropped from the bed and slunk over to the doorway, his tail between his legs. As he reached the open door, he turned and gazed sorrowfully at me once more, shaking his head silently in apology and regret.*

*"Out. You have your own bed downstairs. Go use it."*

*With one last rueful look, the trespasser sloped out of the room, leaving me to deal with my errant wife.*

*I considered waking her up and demanding that she change the bedclothes. That would teach her to allow my side of the bed to be occupied in my absence. Then I sniffed the pillow and decided it smelled clean enough, and I was too damned tired to make an issue of it. All I wanted was to slide*

*into the bed next to Deborah, take her into my arms, and go to sleep. Eventually. After I had given her a damned good spanking, of course.*

*The thought of doing that sent a surge of lust like an electric shock straight to my groin. Even when I'm pissed with Deborah, I still want to make love to her. Well, I had been away for nine days. Nine long, lonely, celibate days with only my right hand to keep me company. After nine nights away from my wife I was seriously in danger of spraining my wrist.*

*So I stripped quickly, dropping my clothes to the floor--a small gesture of revenge and defiance--and slid into bed. Deborah let out a little grunt and rolled over, still asleep, but automatically adjusting her body to mine. After a little shuffling and snuffling, she settled with her head on my shoulder and one of her legs entwined around me.*

*I smiled in the semi-darkness--the door to the hallway was slightly ajar, and the light was still on outside--and moved my arm to circle her shoulders. Then I slid my hand down her back, until I reached the bottom of the t-shirt she was wearing. Grasping the hem, I gently tugged at the material until I had it lifted clear of her butt. I patted her ass a little, then started to move my hand in circles, stroking her soft skin. With my other hand, I reached over to caress her breasts through the material of my t-shirt, and was soon rewarded by a quiet whimper. Deborah was still asleep, but her nipple was hardening and she was becoming aroused.*

*As I continued to play with my wife, I watched her face, and saw her tongue slip out between her lips, wetting them, as she let out another little groan of desire. I wondered whom she was dreaming about, a thought quickly answered as she whispered, "Matthew."*

*Her voice was full of longing and passion, but she was still less than half awake. I decided it was time to wake her up completely.*

*Tweaking her nipple, I said loudly, "At least you got that right. I was worried that you might call out Oscar's name. Have you decided to spice up your sex life while I was away?"*

*Deborah's eyes flew open and she stared at me for a long moment, before letting out a squeak of excitement. Then she pounced.*

*It was quite a while later before any coherent words were exchanged. Deborah had been thoroughly spanked, a process we'd enjoyed a lot, and we were both completely satisfied. It was nice that for once we hadn't had to worry about shutting the bedroom door and closing the circuit for the shielding in our room, as we had the house to ourselves. Well, except for Oscar, who I assumed was sulking downstairs somewhere, probably humping a cushion, or licking his balls.*

*As Deborah and I lay together enjoying the aftermath of pleasure, I asked, "So what was Oscar doing up here? You know he's not allowed in the bedroom."*

*In case you hadn't guessed by now, Oscar is our dog. He's a large golden retriever, given to us--well, technically given to our son, Marcus--just over three years before by my wife's sister, Angel. Oscar had been a sort of consolation prize for Marcus, who'd been promised Angel's dog, Baby, earlier that year. But Angel and her husband, Jack--my alternate self from another reality--long story--had decided to keep Baby on their ship. So that Marcus wouldn't be too disappointed, the next*



*Christmas, Jack and Angel had turned up with a big ball of golden fluff and told us his name was Oscar.*

*Deborah had complained bitterly that they could have got something smaller and less hairy, as she was convinced Oscar would shed his hair all over the house. That, of course, was the pot calling the kettle black, as Deborah sheds her golden mane everywhere, most particularly in my mouth when we're making love. A little more hair from the dog was hardly noticeable.*

*Having moaned and whined for all of thirty seconds, Deborah then declared*

*that she supposed she would just have to put up with it, and promptly fell in love. I told you she was a sucker for big brown eyes, and Oscar had two of the biggest and brownest.*

*Ever since then, while technically Oscar was Marcus' dog, in actuality, he had devoted himself heart and soul to Deborah. While the big, dumb dog went berserk with excitement when Marcus came home from school--literally wetting himself with joy until we trained him out of it--in between times he was Deborah's dog.*

*He followed her around like a big, hairy, golden shadow and would creep onto the furniture given half a chance, in his desire to get as near to her as possible. That led him into conflict with me, of course, as there's only one being in this universe who's allowed to get that close to my wife, and that's me.*

*We'd set the ground rules early. Oscar wasn't allowed on the furniture and he wasn't allowed in our bedroom. Both rules had been broken, and I suspected they had been broken every night while I'd been away.*

*Deborah looked up at me and smiled. "I missed you."*

*It wasn't an answer to my question, but I found I didn't care. The way she looked up at me was enough to drive all thoughts from my mind, other than how much I'd missed her, too.*

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*The next day was busy. After a long, lazy lie-in--nine days, remember. Nine long, lonely days--Deborah stayed home to get the house ready for our visitors, while I drove to the school where our kids boarded. Mattie had joined her older brother there a couple of years before, and fortunately they both loved the place. When Deborah and I were at home, they boarded Monday to Friday, but they could--and did--stay longer when we needed to travel.*

*We always made sure that any trips we took together on behalf of the ISA were scheduled during the school semesters, so we could spend the vacations with the kids. My visit to Minbar had been a*

*last minute affair, hence why Deborah had stayed home to be with our children the previous weekend, while I had traveled to meet with President Delenn alone.*

*So on a sunny spring afternoon, I drove through the country lanes of Cornwall, with feathery clouds floating in a blue sky above my head, feeling at peace with myself and the world. For the next three weeks the kids would be home and we'd be a family again, but we also had extra visitors coming.*

*Marcus was bringing a friend home from school with him, a boy called Sam with whom Marcus had shared a dorm since starting boarding at the school. Sam's parents were archeologists working for IPX--yes, regretfully they knew Max Eilerson quite well--and traveled a lot. Most of the time, Sam would join them wherever they were based at the time of the school vacation, but this time Sam's parents were working out on the Rim, and it would have taken too long for Sam to travel there to join them. So Marcus had asked if Sam could join us for the Easter break.*

*Sam was a nice kid, despite a recent tendency to flush bright red and stand with his mouth open, unable to speak, whenever Deborah entered the room. Since turning fourteen, Sam had discovered that his best friend's mother was a very sexy lady, and he hadn't yet learned to deal with the physical impact her presence had on him.*

*Marcus, being an empath, was all too aware of Sam's obsession, so teased him about it mercilessly. Deborah ignored it, and while sometimes I had to resist the urge to slap the boy silly and remind him who Deborah was married to, mostly I enjoyed the quiet satisfaction of knowing that my wife, the woman whose bed I alone shared--I don't count Oscar--was still desirable to other men. I know it's not exactly generous of me, but I love knowing that other men (and hormone crazed teenage boys) lust after Deborah, but they will never find out how truly amazing she is.*

*So Sam was coming to stay with us for the vacation, and he would be helping us to celebrate Marcus' fifteenth birthday. I made a mental note to remind Deborah not to wear anything too revealing for the party, or poor Sam would have to remain seated with a napkin hiding his embarrassment the whole time.*

*Sam wasn't to be our only visitor. Angel and Jack were also due to join us for a couple of weeks' vacation, with Baby along for the ride. This meant that Oscar would be happy at having a doggy friend to play with, Deborah would be happy to have her sister around, and I would have to be polite to Jack, which I sometimes found difficult. I'm not sure what it says about me that I don't really like Jack too much, given that he's basically another version of me. I guess I should just be grateful that other people--most importantly Deborah--like me more than I like myself.*

*Sam had never met Angel and Jack before, so I was curious to see what impact the raven haired beauty would have on our young visitor. If Deborah's presence sent the poor kid went into hormonal overdrive, I feared he might just masturbate himself to death with Angel around, too. How was I going to explain that to his parents?*

*Grinning, I put those thoughts aside as I swung in through the school gates, only to find that I had been pre-empted. A sleek, red sports car was parked in front of the steps that led up to the school entrance, and Angel sat on the hood, with her legs crossed, showing a long length of*

*beautifully slender thigh, beneath a short, tight, red dress. Jack leaned back in the driver's seat, wearing sunglasses, but no doubt watching the scene in front of him with narrowed eyes.*

*A small crowd of boys had gathered around the car. It was obvious what stage of adolescence each had reached by watching what they were drooling over. They were roughly evenly split between those whose tongues were hanging out at the sight of the car, and those who were shuffling nervously, their hands covering their crotches, as their eyes roamed over Angel's body.*

*Not that I can blame them. It's quite a body. Angel has long legs for her height, a neat ass, tiny waist, and spectacular breasts. The clinging, halter-necked red dress she was wearing displayed all her assets to perfection, and the boys were certainly enjoying the view.*

*I wasn't complaining myself.*

*I pulled up sharply alongside the group, sending pieces of gravel spitting onto the carefully manicured lawns. I knew I'd probably get a note from the headmistress about that later. Angel and Jack both looked up and waved, then a small blonde missile came hurtling down the steps toward me, screaming, "Daddy! You're home!"*

*My daughter, Mattie, had turned ten a couple of months before, and she was still very much a Daddy's girl. Her relationship with her mother had always been a little strained, although it did seem to be getting better as Mattie grew older and her interests grew wider. Nevertheless, my daughter was still happy to see me turning up unexpectedly to collect her and her brother from school.*

*The group of boys surrounding Angel and the car flicked their gaze across at me for a second, then went back to drooling over their chosen object of desire. I saw that Marcus was holding Baby in his arms, and the small dog was trying his hardest to lick my son's nose.*

*Next to Marcus stood Sam, who had grown like a weed since I'd last seen him. He would now be able to look me in the eye, but he had an adolescent lankiness about him that made him look all knees, ears and elbows. I don't think he'd even noticed the car Angel and Jack had arrived in, and as far as I could tell, he hadn't yet managed to lift his eyes far enough to see what Angel's face looked like. Like several of the other boys, his hands fluttered nervously around his groin, trying to conceal a swelling that was visible even inside baggy pants.*

*Angel had waited while I gave Mattie a hug, then rushed over to me, wrapping her arms around me and planting a kiss on my lips that threatened to give me a similar response to that being experienced by the boys. I gently disentangled myself from my sister-in-law and held her out at arms length, trying to look at her in a brotherly fashion.*

*All I can say is that if my appreciation was brotherly, we have an incest problem in our family.*

*Which we do.*

*By now you should have realized that my family isn't exactly the Brady Bunch. They only had to deal with two widowed parents hooking up with three kids of each, a dog, a cat, Alice the housekeeper and Sam the butcher. My family, well... If you haven't figured out by now that we're*

*not a normal family, you haven't been paying attention. No doubt distracted by all the beautiful women.*

*Yes, my family has an incest problem; a couple of cases of wife and husband swapping, some dubious parentages, an alternative me, a shape shifter and then there's the really dangerous part of the clan. The Technomage branch of the family tree. Alwyn and Ishtar are seriously dangerous and possibly senile, and Ishtar seems to be on a permanently short fuse these days. Like some sort of flying powder keg. Just don't tell Ishtar I said that, or she'll try to flame me to death... again.*

*At least Ishtar would feel guilty after she turned me into a burning heap of Gideon ash. Alwyn, on the other hand, would probably give a paternal sniff of disapproval and lecture my heap of burning ashes, telling them I had only got what I deserved.*

*That's my family; strange, but still loving.*

*In a strange sort of way.*

*Angel was as gorgeous and sexy as ever. For a moment, I almost hated my alternate self for being lucky enough to have this woman in love with him, and in his arms and his bed every night. Then I remembered the woman who shared my life and my bed and I put all such envy aside.*

*Angel grinned up at me and said, "We called Demon to tell her we'd swing by the school, but she said you'd just left, so we decided to surprise you."*

*I grinned down at her, keeping my gaze firmly on her face and not allowing my eyes to slide down into her cleavage, which is where they desperately longed to wander. Angel has that effect on most men. They get a bad case of wandering eyes and a strong desire to let their hands wander, too, when she's around.*

*"Consider me surprised. It's good to see you again, Angel." That was somewhat of an understatement, but I was trying to be good, so I looked over at the car and waved, "You too, Jack. You're looking well."*

*Jack turned his face toward me and waved, but I couldn't read his expression as his eyes were still covered by the shades. A small smile played around his lips, and I could only guess it came from amusement at the reaction his wife produced. Like me, Jack was totally secure in the knowledge of his wife's fidelity, and also like me, I think he obtained a certain malicious enjoyment from knowing how envious other men were. Then he was distracted by a question from one of the car enthusiasts, leaving me free to walk over to join the group of boys, with one arm around my daughter and the other around my sister-in-law.*

*There are times when even I know how lucky I am.*

*Disengaging myself from the ladies, I gave Marcus a hug and explained how I had gotten home early, all the while trying to avoid Baby's questing tongue, which seemed determined to lick everyone and everything he could reach. Sam dragged his eyes away from Angel for long enough to reach out and shake my hand, politely thanking me for letting him join us for the Easter break.*

*I grinned and assured him that he was very welcome. The poor kid didn't know that I could see hours of fun and amusement ahead, just watching him trying to cope with having two of the most beautiful women in the universe constantly nearby. If the weather got warm enough for swimming, poor Sam was likely to melt into a puddle of hormones. The sight of Deborah and Angel in bikinis could bring a grown man to his knees. Poor Sam wouldn't stand a chance.*

*The group of boys started to disperse as other parents arrived to collect their offspring for the holidays. From the corner of my eye, I could see a number of couples where the father was receiving a sharp dig in the ribs from the mother, having allowed his gaze to linger too long on Angel's curves. She really does have a special kind of gravity that pulls at men's eyes, in the same way a black hole pulls light and matter inexorably toward it. They can't help themselves. It's just another rule of nature, but for some reason, women can't understand it.*

*We soon got ourselves organized, and it was decided that Mattie would ride with me, along with all the baggage the three kids were bringing home for the vacation, while Marcus and Sam would ride in the back of Jack and Angel's car, with Baby. If Jack hadn't stayed firmly in the driving seat, I may have objected to this arrangement, as I rather like my son the way he is, with all his limbs attached. If Angel had been driving, there was no guarantee that any of them would get home in one piece. Angel does love speed.*

*With a spin of the wheels that sent more gravel onto the lawns--I was definitely going to be getting a nasty note from the headmistress--Jack sped out of the school grounds, with me following at a slightly more sedate pace.*

*Mattie chatted animatedly all the way home, telling me about the new lessons in martial arts she had started taking the previous term. Mattie had gotten it into her head that she wanted to follow me into Earthforce when she grew up, but for some reason, she'd set her heart on entering the same service as her grandmother. My mother, after whom Mattie was named, had been a Gropo, and it looked like my daughter might become one, too.*

*Unless she changed her mind again.*

*During the Christmas vacation she had confided that she wanted to be a construction worker. And the previous summer, she'd wanted to be a chef when she grew up.*

*I smiled as I listened to my daughter's chatter, only knowing that whatever she decided to do with her life, I would support her completely.*

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*That night, after dinner, I sat with my arm around Deborah while Jack and Angel sat on the sofa opposite. Mattie was in bed and the boys had gone off to Marcus' room to play whatever games boys of that age play. They'd said they had a new role-playing game they wanted to try out, but I suspected that Marcus wanted to show Sam the latest additions to his growing collection of pornography. I knew where my son kept his stash, and I checked it periodically to make sure he wasn't getting into anything too weird, like Max Eilerson's predilection for Pak'ma'ra porn. Other than that, I left him alone.*



*No, I wasn't looking at it. You always think the worst of me, don't you? It's like you think you know me or something, but I just wanted to make sure that Marcus wasn't getting any specials from Uncle Max, who's into some serious kink. Well, he used to be, until his wives proved to him that reality can beat fantasy, especially if one of your wives is a shape-shifter who doesn't know what the word "SHAME" means.*

*Yes, a shape-shifter. You really should pay more attention to who's part of this family.*

*Anyway, as I was saying, boys have appetites, and I'd rather they played with themselves over some harmless pictures than started experimenting with their school friends, male or female. I'd decided that for his sixteenth birthday I'd give Marcus the same gift my father had given to me at that age. I still had fond memories of the beautiful and gentle lady who had introduced me to the joys of sex. I hoped I could find someone equally considerate and caring to help Marcus through that difficult time. I decided that I'd talk to Jack later and see if he had any contacts that might be able to help. The big day was just over a year away, but it needed careful preparation and planning.*

*None of which I planned to tell my wife about.*

*As my thoughts turned to Deborah, she turned to look at me and smiled. Have I told you how much I love that smile? Deborah is a reserved person, who only lets her feelings show to those she loves and trusts. To see her smiling at me like that reminded me how lucky I was to be the center of her attention and affection.*

*"So, are you going to tell us what Deleenn wanted to see you about?"*

*We hadn't had time--well, OK, we'd been otherwise occupied--since I got home for me to let Deborah know what my recent mission had been about. I'd wanted to wait until the kids were elsewhere, and Jack and Angel were present, anyway, so this was as good a time as any.*

*I leaned forward to take a sip from my glass of malt whiskey--one of the advantages of having Jack and Angel to visit is that they always bring a supply of something new they've found on their trading trips for me to try. Some were good and some not so good, but their latest discovery was a particularly fine malt, distilled by a far flung colony of Scots who had departed Earth in search of a better future. Something about the air, the water and the land they had colonized produced the best scotch it had ever been my pleasure to taste.*



*Where was I?*

*Oh yes. Having taken a sip, I closed my eyes and savored the taste for a moment, then proceeded to brief my family.*

*"I can't tell you much at this stage, as Delenn doesn't have much information. All she knows is that there seems to be a new threat emerging on the border of Drazi territory. We don't know much about it, except that ships seem to be disappearing, and inevitably, the Drazi want instant action. They're not the most patient species in the ISA."*

*Jack snorted his agreement, and took a sip from his own glass as I went on, "Delenn wants to send out an expedition to find out what's going on. The only information we have so far is that contact has been made with a race called the Nabulans, who occupy a planet just outside Drazi space. Working through them, we may be able to find out more about this new aggressor, although we don't even have a name for them as yet."*

*Jack frowned and put his glass down on the table beside the couch. "How big an expedition is Delenn planning to send?"*

*I knew Jack sometimes found it difficult to reconcile his knowledge of this universe with his memories of his own world. In Jack's reality, Delenn had died long ago, killed in a Drakh raid on Minbar.*

*"Big." I looked at Jack seriously, and I could see he understood the importance this issue was being given within the ISA. "She's sending a fleet of White Stars, with Entil'zha Ivanova in command. And to back them up, she's sending the Excalibur."*

*I was still a little irritated by this decision of Delenn's. In my view, the Excalibur alone would have been enough for this mission, and John Matheson was quite capable of commanding. To bring Ivanova in as Fleet Commander over John's head seemed unnecessary, and an insult to my friend and protégé.*

*Deborah patted my arm, obviously sensing my annoyance, and said, "I'm sure Delenn has her reasons, and she would never have agreed to John's appointment as Captain of the Excalibur if she didn't have complete faith in him."*

*My wife may be an empath rather than a telepath, but she knows me so damned well, it often feels as if she can read my mind.*

*Angel nodded her agreement with Deborah's comment, then asked, "So where do you fit into this, Matt? If Delenn is sending in Susan, John and a fleet of White Stars, what is there left for you to do?"*

*It was a good question. So good in fact, that I'd asked Delenn the same thing myself.*

*I grinned back at Angel as I answered, "Delenn wants me to lead the discussions with the Nabulans. I told her I couldn't do anything until the school vacations were over, and she's agreed to wait. She needs time to free up the ships she wants to send anyway. So when the kids go back to school she wants me to go to Nabula with the full force of the ISA backing me up when I negotiate with them, and she wants me to decide if we can bring them into the ISA. Having the Nabulans on our side could be a great help with whoever this new crowd are, who have been attacking the Drazis."*

*I turned to Deborah and smiled, "And if I'm going in to negotiate with a new species, I want you right by my side, telling me if they're being honest."*

*Deborah smiled back and whispered, "Like there was ever any chance I'd stay home without you."*

*I kissed her gently on the lips then turned to Jack and Angel. "If you can spare the time, I'd like you guys to come along, too, for two reasons. First, there's something about the descriptions of the ships that have been attacking the Drazi that makes me think of the ships that tried to follow you through from your universe, Jack."*

*That made Jack sit up abruptly, nearly spilling his drink. I hurried on, "There are no images I can check, but just something about the way Delenn described their tactics makes me wonder if we've finally come up against their equivalents in this universe. It would be good to have you with us, Jack, to tell me if I'm right or wrong."*

*Jack nodded in understanding, then asked, "You said you had two reasons for wanting us along. What's the second?"*

*This was the tricky one. I wasn't sure how Jack and Angel would react, but I forged ahead anyway. "If Delenn is worried enough to want to send a whole fleet to back me up on this one, then I'm worried enough to want a secret weapon behind me."*

*Jack frowned while Angel looked worried and I hurried to reassure them. "I'm just being super-cautious here. I don't really believe we'll need the power of the merge, but I'd rather go in knowing it's there if I need it."*

*Angel nibbled on her thumbnail then said hesitantly, "I don't know, Matt. We haven't tried to merge since leaving Eriadne after..." Her words ran out and she sighed, "Well, you know what happened there. Demon, Lily, Ilas and I can all link now, from wherever we are, but the thought of merging again..."*

*Angel left her concerns unvoiced, as Deborah stood and moved over to the sofa to sit next to her sister. Patting Angel's knee reassuringly, my wife said quietly, "It will only be Lily and me. It won't be a full merge. And I know you can do it, darling. You're so much stronger now. You can control it, I know you can."*

*There had been a time when Deborah had been the controller of the sisters when they merged. She had directed the weapon the Vorlons had created when they brought the sisters together, and only she had retained the memories of the things they had done when merged. Deborah sometimes still had nightmares about those times, which woke her, crying, in the night. I had to hold her and soothe her, until she could fall asleep again, my arms around her, holding her against the darkness and bad memories, just as she held me, when I dreamed of the Cerberus and how that ship had been destroyed.*

*Since the Vorlon that lived inside my wife's head had gone into hibernation, Deborah had lost the power to control the merge, and that burden had fallen to Angel, who was now the strongest of the sisters. Angel's telekinetic powers had grown steadily over the years, and when they had finally*

*burst out after her wedding to Jack on Eriadne, they had been truly terrifying and awe-inspiring. I wanted those powers at my back if I was taking myself and my wife into danger.*

*Jack leaned forward and put his glass down on the table, not quite banging it down, but setting it firmly enough to attract our attention. "If Angelique doesn't feel comfortable with this, then we're not doing it. I'm always happy to do my bit to support the ISA, but not at Angelique's expense. And that's final."*

*Angel turned at once to her husband and smiled at him gratefully. Seeing how she looked at him, her crystal blue eyes filled with love and passion, sent a stab of jealousy through my chest, which I quickly suppressed. I took another quick pull at my scotch while keeping quiet and listening to Angel's response.*

*"Jack, if Demon thinks I can do this, then with her and Lily's help, maybe I can." She sent a grateful glance to her sister, who smiled back. I wondered for a moment what silent messages were flying back and forth between the two women, and decided to ask Deborah later. Not that she'd tell me if she didn't think I needed to know.*

*Angel went on, "I'd really hate the idea of Matt and Demon going into a dangerous situation without us, if we could help them. Can we reschedule our trips for a while?"*

*After a short exchange, the couple settled things between them. They agreed to take Deborah and me to Minbar at the end of the school vacations, and then to join us for a few weeks afterwards.*

*Deborah came back to sit next to me, and curled up at my side as I lifted my glass, emptied it and asked, "So what are G'Tan, No'Kar and Harry up to? What kept them from joining us?"*

*It turned out to be a long and complicated story.*

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30th April 2284

*I leaned back on the bed; my hands behind my head, watching my wife tidy away our things. The cabin we were sharing on the Angel's Rest wasn't large, as the ship wasn't designed to take passengers. She was principally a cargo ship, so the accommodations were basic, but there was enough space to store the few items we'd brought on board for the four day voyage to Minbar. For me, that consisted of a few changes of socks, briefs and t-shirts. Deborah hadn't brought much more, but being the neat-freak she is, she had to stow our things away tidily.*

*I knew it was pointless trying to help; I'd just get in her way. So I lay back on the bed--the only place where she wouldn't trip over me as she moved around the cabin--and enjoyed the opportunity of watching my wife undisturbed. I let my eyes wander over her beautiful butt, agreeably wrapped in a pair of tight, black pants that hugged her thighs and were cut off just below her knees, displaying nicely curved calf muscles, and neat ankles. Shifting my gaze upwards, as Deborah turned toward me; I allowed my eyes to linger on her breasts, which stretched the material of the black, sleeveless t-shirt she wore. The front was cut low enough to present me with an excellent view of a delectable cleavage whenever she leaned forward.*

*It took me a while to drag my eyes away from that view and up to Deborah's face. She wore little make-up, as usual, and her golden mane of hair was tied back loosely in a black chiffon scarf that always revived fond memories of a time she'd used a similar scarf to blindfold me.*

*It's fair to say I was enjoying the view, and Deborah smiled as she looked up and caught me watching her.*

*"Comfortable?" She shook her head in amusement.*

*"Not really." I wriggled on the bed a little, trying to find a softer spot. "The mattress is harder than I prefer."*

*Deborah chuckled and came to sit next to me on the bed. "You'd better make the most of it. When we get to Minbar, you may have to try to sleep on one of those slanty Minbari beds."*

*I blew a raspberry to express my contempt for that idea. "Not a chance. If DeLenn can't find us a decent human bed, I'll beg quarters off John. Then we can live on the Excalibur and shuttle down each day. But in the meantime..."*

*I grabbed Deborah and pulled her down next to me, rolling her onto her back and starting to let my hands wander over the parts of her body where my eyes had recently lingered.*

*Deborah let out a small squeal of protest and tried to slap my wandering hands away. "Stop it! You know what happens when you get me going and we can't..."*

*I stopped her words with a kiss, and when I finally released her lips I grinned down at her. "I rather like what happens when I get you going."*

*The smile she gave me was full of love and desire, but she shook her head and said, "So do I, but not here. The cabin isn't shielded. Jack and Angel won't mind, and G'Tan and No'Kar would probably think it's fun, but poor Harry would be confused and frightened, and as for Baby... Well, you don't like him trying to hump your leg at any time. Can you imagine what the poor dog would be like if he got caught up in one of my sendings?"*

*I had to laugh. I'd often suggested that everyone would be better off if Angel's dog lost his balls. That dog humped anything that moved and quite a few things that didn't. He'd tried to mount Oscar more than once, much to our dog's surprise. I had to admit that the idea of what Baby would be like when affected by Deborah sending one of her orgasms was less than appealing. In fact the idea was truly terrifying.*

*I stopped my attempts at seduction and pouted. "So the next four days are going to be celibate are they? Well that's no fun at all."*

*Deborah laughed softly and gently pushed me over until I was resting on my back and she was looking down at me. "Don't worry. I can take care of you in other ways. I'll just have to be inventive."*

*The prospect of four days of being subjected to Deborah's inventiveness had many attractions, so I stopped pouting and pulled her down to my side again, where she tucked herself alongside me, and*

*lay with her head on my shoulder.*

*We lay like that in contented silence for some time, giving me the opportunity to think about how lucky I was. Casting my mind back over the previous couple of weeks, I couldn't help but smile.*

*It had been a great vacation, with perfect weather, everyone having fun, no arguments, the kids behaving themselves, and even the dogs getting along together. Marcus' birthday had been the best day. The sun had shone and we'd all ended up partying around the pool, with lots of my son's friends and local families coming over to join us for a barbeque.*



*Jack and I had kept the grill going all day, producing a constant supply of food for the revelers, while Deborah and Angel kept us nicely mellow with a steady flow of cold beer. Both women had worn sun dresses over their bikinis, and when they stripped off to go swimming, I thought poor Sam would have heart failure. My son's best friend nearly went cross-eyed trying to watch both of them at the same time, and then had to spend the rest of the day curled up on a sun-bed, trying to conceal the effect they had on him.*

*I'd got a narrowed eyed warning look from my wife when she'd caught me chuckling at poor Sam's dilemma, but that just made the situation worse. Deborah looks even more gorgeous when she's mad.*

*It had been a glorious day, and everyone--even Sam after he took a swim in the cold sea--had a wonderful time. That day, and indeed the whole vacation, will stay in my mind forever as one of the happiest times of my life. When the kids had gone back to school, we'd handed over the house and Oscar to a house sitter, and set off for Minbar with Jack, Angel and their crew on the Angel's Rest, looking forward to our next adventure.*

*I really should know better by now. Happiness always has to be paid for. It was inevitable that bad things were coming my way.*

*But for the moment, I held my beautiful wife in my arms, treasured memories of a happy family holiday, and looked forward to the mission ahead.*

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#### 5th May 2284

*The briefing room in the Ranger training camp in the hills above the Minbari city of Tuzanor was simply decorated. A large round table was surrounded by six chairs, all of which were comfortable enough not to make your butt sore when sitting for long meetings, but not so comfortable so as to tempt you to doze off. Which is probably a good thing as long meetings always have a soporific effect on me.*

*Fortunately, I can sleep with my eyes open, which is why Max Eilerson never knew just how many of his interminable lectures I slept through during our search for the cure to the Drakh plague. And*

*before you start frowning at my neglect of duty, just let me remind you that I always had my XO, John Matheson, sitting next to me, who always listened carefully, and summarized the juicy bits for me later.*

*Hey! Don't look at me like that. I wasn't taking advantage of John. John's a telepath, he'd NEVER let me take advantage of him. He was just aware of my incredible responsibilities during our search for the cure for the plague, so he was always willing to take a little more weight off my shoulders.*

*It's what a good Exec does.*

*Really.*

*Why are you still muttering about "Hero Worship" and "Taking Advantage"?*

*Anyway, there was no danger of me falling asleep in this meeting at the Rangers' camp. The attendees alone were enough to capture my rapt attention. The president of the Inter-Stellar Alliance, Delenn, sat at the head of the table. If you're wondering how a round table can have a head, you've obviously never met Delenn. Her sheer presence makes any chair she sits in seem like a throne, and any place she sits automatically becomes the focus of all attention.*

*Delenn's manner was brisk and professional, but there was an aura about her, something behind her eyes that hinted at overwhelming sadness and loss. Her husband, John Sheridan, the previous president of the ISA had 'died' three years before.*

*His empty ship had been found, dead in space, in the Coriana system. All the air locks on his ship were sealed, but there was no trace of Sheridan inside. Some of the Minbari believed that he would return one day, like some legend of King Arthur, but I knew Delenn didn't accept that. Everything about her indicated that she was a woman mourning for her lost husband, a soul grieving for her mate. But none of her sorrow was allowed to impact on the briefing Delenn gave her audience that day.*

*Looking around the room, I could see the others present were listening with as much interest and attention as me. John Matheson, Captain of the ISA flagship, the Excalibur, sat next to me. We had met up the previous evening when the Angel's Rest had arrived in orbit over Minbar and entered the Excalibur's landing bay. It had been a tight squeeze and required some very fancy flying on the part of Captain Jack Gideon, but after a few hairy moments, the Angel's Rest had settled safely, if a little snugly, at the back of the bay.*

*As soon as the bay re-pressurized, the doors had flown open and John, Lily, Luke and all their children had come flying through, as fast as their legs could carry them. Deborah and Angel had run down the Angel's Rest's ramp to join their sister for an emotional reunion. Jack and I had stood at the top of the ramp, watching our wives, while John and Luke climbed up to join us. The handshake John and I had exchanged had been brief but heartfelt. I was immensely complimented whenever John took my hand. For a telepath it was a demonstration of trust and affection rarely shown. We may have had most of our contact through vid messages over the last few years, but I still thought of John as my closest friend.*

*Deborah and I had moved our gear to the more comfortable quarters set aside for us on the Excalibur--our old shielded quarters, where any sendings Deborah might project wouldn't be felt by the whole crew. Despite the reduction in Deborah's powers since Galen's attack on her, there were certain feelings she could still broadcast loud and clear, and the loudest of all are her orgasms. I know I shouldn't boast, but it would be false modesty if I said I don't feel a little smug about just how often and how hard I can still make my wife come.*

*We had joined John, Luke and their family for a reunion dinner in one of the mess halls, which John had reserved for the occasion. This had given me the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with my unacknowledged daughter, Naima.*

*The thirteen year old girl was still the spitting image of her mother, with vibrant red hair and emerald eyes. No one but me knew that she wasn't John or Luke's daughter. OK, so maybe Grandpa Alwyn suspected something, as he always smirked whenever he changed her diapers but if you ever met a Technomage you'd know they have only two expressions. Smug superiority and smirk. But Naima was mine, the living aftermath of a week when Lily and I had been separated from our partners, and had sought comfort in each other's arms. And in my bed.*

*Naima may have looked like her mother, but her temperament was much calmer. She had none of Lily's impetuous energy, nor Lily's volatile temper. My beautiful daughter was calm and graceful, with an impish sense of humor. I was as proud of her as I was of Marcus and Mattie, and my only regret was that she'd never know how much I loved her and how much I wished I could tell the universe that she was mine.*

*Over dinner, to my surprise, John had announced that Jack Gideon's presence was also requested for the briefing next day. Jack looked equally taken aback until John had grinned and told him that Delenn, having been told that Jack's ship was on board the Excalibur, had decided that two Gideons were better than one, and it was probably safer to keep us both where she could keep an eye on us.*

*So now Jack sat on the other side of John, next to Delenn, while on my other side sat the head of the Rangers, Entil'zha Ivanova.*

*Susan Ivanova had resigned her commission as a General in Earthforce to take the role of Ranger One at the time of John Sheridan's death. Like Delenn, her manner was brisk and efficient, but there was a sense of sorrow that hung about her like a cloak. Since her husband, Ranger Marcus Cole, had disappeared nearly five years before, Susan had locked herself into a rigid emotional straight-jacket, refusing to acknowledge the grief she obviously endured.*

*Her dark hair was now streaked with gray, and fine lines creased the corners of her lovely gray eyes, but Ivanova was still a beautiful and striking looking woman, although she didn't wear her years lightly. She was 4 years younger than me, but I flatter myself that we look much the same age. Don't tell me if you think I'm wrong. No, really, I don't want to know.*

*In her Ranger's uniform, Susan sat with her back straight and a frown of concentration on her face as Delenn spoke, listening carefully, nodding occasionally, indicating her familiarity with the information the Minbari leader was now imparting to us.*



*I could see Jack was watching Ivanova closely, and I realized that in his universe, the two had never met. In that universe, Ivanova had been killed when her Warlock Destroyer, the John Proctor, had been destroyed by the Drakh, after all humans on Earth had been wiped out by the Drakh plague. Jack's universe had been a dark and dismal place, where humanity had been massacred, and even after all the years Jack had spent in our universe, there was still a darkness about him, a haunted look behind his eyes when he thought no one was watching him.*

*Perhaps the biggest surprise that day was the man sitting between Ivanova and Delenn. An anonymous looking--apparently human--Ranger, he had greeted us politely when the Excalibur's shuttle had brought us down to the Ranger training camp, and had escorted John, Jack and me to the meeting room. I had expected him to depart as soon as we entered the room, but to my surprise, he had immediately moved to Ivanova's side where she and Delenn had stood waiting to greet us.*

*I'd looked more carefully at the unnamed Ranger, and something about his sparkling blue eyes suddenly struck me as familiar. I'd seen an identical pair of eyes looking at me with mixed distain and irritation on far too many occasions to mistake them.*

*"Vya? Is that you?" My question had brought everyone's attention to the Ranger.*

*With a wide grin, the man's features had blurred, the color of his hair had changed, and suddenly we were faced with a completely different creature to the man who had been our escort. The only things that remained unchanged were those bright blue eyes inherited from his father, Max Eilerson. In all other respects, Vya was his mother's son. His mother was a shape-shifter, and 'sister' to my wife, making him some kind of nephew.*

*OK, so my family is complicated. I warned you. I did. But you didn't believe me, did you?*

*Deal with it. I have to.*

*"Hi Uncle Matt. I might have known it would be you who would spot me. Both my Moms always said you weren't easy to fool." Vya's golden skin and lavender hair blurred again, as he resumed his human façade.*

*I had to remind myself that if I thought my family was complicated it was nothing compared to Vya's. His father was human, but both his mothers were not. His birth mother, Ilas, was an alien whose race had long disappeared from the galaxy, leaving a mystery as to where the Vorlons had taken her from, and what they had done to her to make her into the shape-shifter she was. Ilas, Max Eilerson and Dureena had spent the last fifteen years working with Inter-Planetary Expeditions, combing the galaxy for an answer to that mystery, but so far without success.*

*Vya's other mother, Dureena, was a professional thief and the only survivor of another dead race, the Zanderi. Her people had been killed by the Shadows in their final struggle against the Vorlon. Dureena had only survived because she had been sold as a slave by her family, and she was far away from Zander Prime when it had been destroyed. Vya was not genetically related to Dureena, but she had helped raise him and was as much his mother as Ilas.*

*It was hard to remember that Vya was three months younger than my own son, Marcus, and was therefore not quite fifteen Earth years old. Ilas and Vya's race aged more quickly than humans and*

*Minbari, so Vya was a full grown adult, and had joined the Rangers three years before. He had progressed rapidly through the training camp, and Deborah and I had received regular updates from his proud parents as to how well he was doing. Vya had finished training the previous summer, and since then, he'd been involved in various missions, most of which he hadn't been either willing or able to tell his parents about. The way Ivanova had introduced him made the reasons for Vya's reticence obvious.*

*The Entil'zha had smiled as she touched the young man's shoulder and said, "I sometimes forget that my best undercover operative is also a member of the extended Gideon/Matheson/Eilerson clan. Vya is here today to help with the briefing. Most of the information we have--albeit limited--has been obtained through the bravery and perseverance of this young man."*

*Vya's cheeks had glowed pink, which made me wonder if when he shifted shape to human he also changed his underlying physical structure. I was sure that the color of his natural blood wouldn't be red. I had pushed aside my wandering thoughts and held my hand out, grinning as I said, "Good to hear you're doing so well, Vya."*

*We had then arranged ourselves around the round table in the center of the room, and Delenn had begun her briefing.*

*"Gentlemen." Delenn had nodded her head courteously to the rest of us sitting around the table. "Thank you for joining us here on Minbar and agreeing to help us with this mission." Her manners were impeccable, but it was hardly necessary to thank us. John was directly under her command, and wild horses wouldn't have kept Jack and me away from a mission that Delenn felt warranted our talents.*

*Don't ask exactly what those talents are, OK? Just be satisfied that double dealing deviousness can be an asset in the right places.*

*Delenn went on to brief us, with much the same information that she'd given me before. A new race on the borders of Drazi space. No name for them as yet. Ships disappearing, Yada yada yada. I zoned out for a while, letting Delenn bring the others up to speed with the information she'd given me when I last visited Minbar.*

*I sat up and started to pay attention again when Ivanova leaned forward and weighed in with the latest information the Rangers had brought in. Well, one Ranger in particular, who was sitting right next to his Entil'zha, trying-and failing-to look modest. He gets that from his father, Max Eilerson, too, who couldn't have faked modesty if his life had depended on it, and who had never, ever felt that particular emotion in his entire life. Did I tell you that I don't much like Max? Oh, you figured that out for yourselves, did you? Fair enough.*

*"Vya went down to investigate the Nabulans in more detail." This was the race we were due to visit, the intermediaries who might know more about the new threat from near their space. Ivanova went on, "He took the form of the Nabulans and went undercover."*

*As she spoke, Vya shifted again. He gained several centimeters in height as he sat and his skin darkened and turned scaly, all his hair shrinking back into a differently shaped skull. The back of his head receded and the front of his face projected forward, giving a longer jaw bone, which when*

*he smiled-I think it was smile-displayed an awful lot of very sharp looking teeth. Vya's ears disappeared, leaving only small holes in the sides of his head, while his eyes retreated under hooded lids, which when he opened them, showed slits for pupils.*

*While all these changes to Vya's head were taking place, his body had also shifted, his neck lengthening and his shoulders sloping and narrowing. His arms bulked out, and his hands shifted, four fingers merging into two, with a large opposable thumb, each tipped with a very strong and sharp looking claw.*

*I decided I wouldn't want to go hand to hand with one of these guys. He could rip your guts out with those claws, and feast on your entrails afterwards with those teeth. Something told me that the Nabulans weren't vegetarians.*



*Ivanova waved her hand and Vya stood, stepping back from the table to let us see his full anatomy. Although his upper body had grown upwards several centimeters, he was no taller than an average human or Minbari. His legs had bent at the knees, with bulky thighs, heavy calf muscles, and three toed feet with heels that lifted off the floor. Vya's stance was a forward lean, as he now had to balance the thick, heavy tail that waved around behind him. If the claws didn't get you, a swipe from that tail could do significant damage.*

*The only good thing I could see about this race was that they bore no resemblance to the species that had pursued Jack Gideon's Excalibur through a rift in space into our universe. I knew exactly what those bastards looked like, from the corpses we had autopsied after their attempted invasion of my Excalibur.*

*Despite that little bit of cheer, I still didn't like the look of these Nabulans.*

*I made a silent vow that I was definitely taking a PPG with me when I went down to meet these people, although looking at the thickness of the scaly skin that showed above the neck of Vya's Rangers' uniform, I had to wonder how much damage a PPG would do. Maybe an old-fashioned slug thrower would have more impact. Maybe a shotgun. A nice sawn-off one, which I could conceal under a long coat.*

*Vya's tooth filled mouth opened and a long thin tongue flicked out, seeming to taste the air. Then he spoke, with a hoarse, scratchy voice.*

*"The Nabulans have excellent eyesight and their sense of smell is much keener than a human or Minbari. They are stronger and faster than most ISA races, although their hearing isn't acute. They only hear the middle range of sounds that humans hear, missing high and low notes completely. It's about the only way in which humans and Minbari are physically superior to them. Even a Minbari Warrior would have a match on his or her hands against one of this species."*

*That sinister looking tongue flicked out again as he went on, "The only other advantage we have over them is their need for a warm, humid climate. They do not enjoy the conditions that are prevalent on most ISA worlds. Places like Narn and the Drazi home-world would be torture to*

*them, with their hot, dry climates. Here on Minbar, I have to constantly adjust my metabolism, to prevent my mucous membranes drying out. It's very uncomfortable."*

*Ivanova gave a small smile and said, "In that case, by all means shift back to something more comfortable. I'm sure we've all seen enough."*

*More than enough as far as I was concerned. I didn't have any great desire to see that species again, but here I was, headed straight into the lion's den. Or maybe the lizard's nest. Something like that anyway.*

*Vya shifted back to his natural golden-skinned appearance and slid back into his chair as I asked, "So what's the climate like on Nabula? Is it all hot and wet?" Just my luck. I never did enjoy saunas, and I particularly disliked the idea of having to carry out formal negotiations in one.*

*Vya shook his head. "No. They only inhabit one continent. The rest of the planet is pretty much the same as Earth. Unfortunately, all the negotiations will be conducted in their capital city, which is on an equatorial island where the temperature averages 35 degrees centigrade, and the humidity is constant at around 90%."*

*I groaned and heard Jack grumble under his breath, "I don't care what they think, I'm going down in a full environment suit."*

*It was a good idea but unfortunately, as the ISA's ambassador, that option wouldn't be open to me. I decided that if I couldn't be comfortable, no one would be and I'd ban environment suits for everyone. If I was going to suffer, I wasn't going to suffer alone.*

*Vya sat back, and Ivanova took up the briefing. Clicking a control at her side, she brought up a holographic image of the Nabulan system in the middle of the table around which we sat. The image showed where the Nabulan sun sat in relation to the Drazi system. As Ivanova spoke, lights started to flick on, all around the Nabulan area of space.*

*"Each one of these markers represents the place where a missing ship was last tracked. The Nabulans deny all knowledge of these disappearances, but Vya's investigations indicate that this may not be entirely accurate."*

*Ivanova must have mellowed with age. When I first met her, she would just have called them damned liars. I watched as light after light flickered into being on the image, noting that some were red, while others shone in blue. Before I could ask, Jack piped up, "What's the significance of the color scheme?"*

*The Entil'zha's mouth tightened as she said quietly, "The blue lights represent Ranger ships. Those three brighter lights are White Stars. That's what has us worried. Something out there is capable of taking out a White Star and we want to know what it is."*

*This was news to me, and it explained why Delenn was sending us out in force. The Excalibur, backed by a small fleet of White Stars, should be able to stand up to anything the galaxy had to throw at her.*

*I hoped.*

*John leaned forward in his chair and asked quietly, "Why are you so sure that it's not the Nabulans who are destroying these ships? What makes you think there's another race involved?"*

*It was a good question. Based on the evidence in front of us, if I were Delenn, I'd be sending in an attack fleet, not an embassy mission.*

*Delenn answered calmly, "We are not certain. Until we are, we will proceed with caution. It would be unfortunate to turn this race into victims, merely because they happen to live in close proximity to an aggressor. There is also the issue of technology. What we have seen, and this has been confirmed by Vya's investigations, indicates that the Nabulans do not have the weapons technology to take on a White Star. This adds some weight to their protestations of innocence."*

*The President of the ISA paused, choosing her words carefully. "The Nabulans say they know who is attacking ISA ships, and that they can act as intermediaries in negotiations to prevent more attacks. We choose to believe this for the moment, but we will not allow ourselves to be blinded to the possibility that they lie."*

*She went on, "Your mission will be to identify whether they are telling the truth, and if so, negotiate an agreement with them to allow for our future peaceful co-existence. This will include appropriate boundaries and trading agreements. If you find they are being less than truthful, then you will return to Minbar, and we will consider what action is necessary. If the Nabulans are responsible for the loss of shipping in their area of space, they will answer to me and to the ISA. That I promise."*

*The look on Delenn's face showed she meant business. I never wanted to get on the wrong side of that lady. John Sheridan had once told me a story about how she had arrived with a Minbari fleet to rescue Babylon 5 from an armada of Earth warships, when the station had seceded from Earth. She had told the Earthforce ships to withdraw and when they had refused, she had said, "Only one human captain has ever survived battle with a Minbari fleet. He is behind me. You are in front of me. If you value your lives, be somewhere else."*

*She hadn't needed to say it twice.*

*After a pause, we got into the finer detail of how our fleet would be structured and how Ivanova would be in command, but from her White Star. She had no intention of undermining John's authority on the Excalibur, which pleased me.*

*The meeting broke up after a couple of hours, but as we were leaving, I noticed that Ivanova was still seated at the table, staring at the holographic image that still revolved in the air above it. Her eyes were focused on one bright point of light on the edge of the system.*

*I paused and asked, "What's so special about that one?"*

*Ivanova's cool gray eyes turned on me, and for a moment I could see all the pain she usually hid so well. Then it disappeared, and her voice was low and controlled as she said softly, "That was Marcus' ship. It was the first one to vanish in that area."*

*Before I could respond, she stood and strode from the room.*

*Jack stood at my shoulder and whistled softly. He'd never met Marcus Cole, but he'd heard a lot about him from Angel.*

*"I think we now know why Ivanova is leading this mission. This is going to get interesting."*

*Jack's words hung in the air as we left the room with John and Vya.*

*We had no idea just how right he was.*

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*That evening John hosted a dinner aboard the Excalibur, with Ivanova, Delenn and Vya joining us in the mess hall. John, Luke and Lily were accompanied by their three children, and John had also insisted that G'Tan and No'Kar should take part in the 'family' meal. Harry had been invited, too, but Angel smiled as she told us that he'd been far too intimidated by the idea of dining with the President of the ISA to even consider accepting the invitation.*

*"He said he'd stay in his room with Baby. That probably means that Baby will be sick tomorrow, as Harry always spoils him."*

*Angel smiled fondly as she spoke, and I wasn't sure if her affection was for the great lunk of a man who had befriended her in the years she had lived with Lucas Buck, or for the dog Lucas had given her. Either way I couldn't help but be reminded of my long lost but not lamented ancestor. I still had a promise to fulfill regarding Lucas.*

*Someday I planned to find him and kill him.*

*While I'd been distracted by thoughts of Lucas Buck, Jack had been regaling the gathered assembly with stories of the many and varied mischiefs Baby had got up to on the Angel's Rest. Angel laughingly defended her dog, teasing Jack that he loved Baby really. Jack glowered but I could tell he was joking.*

*I can pretty much always tell what Jack is thinking and feeling because he's another version of me. It's somewhat disconcerting to find yourself one half of a pair of identical twins when you're in your late forties, as I had been when I first met Jack Gideon. I often found myself resenting the man who wore my face. He was too similar to me for comfort and he made me see things about myself which I didn't particularly like. He had also married Angel, who I loved more than I should, and I could never quite forgive him for that.*

*I was just settling into a nice brood when my wife brought me to my senses by leaning across from her seat next to me, kissing my cheek gently, and whispering "I love you." She touched my hand and through that contact sent me a tiny ripple of emotion. It left me in no doubt about the truth of her statement.*

*Being married to an empath has its advantages. Deborah always knows how to cheer me up and just when I need that little boost that she alone can give me. I smiled at her, then turned my attention back to the conversation.*

*G'Tan had picked up the story telling, and had most people laughing at his outrageous tales of the things he and his Narn Marines had got up to while they had lived on board the Excalibur. He*

*caught my eye and winked, saying, "Of course, we made sure the Captain knew nothing about our activities."*

*Before I could speak, John cut in, a wry smile on his face and his voice dead-pan as he said, "Don't be so sure, G'Tan. Captain Gideon and I didn't miss much of what went on aboard this ship. We just chose to turn a blind eye when it suited us."*

*If G'Tan had had eyebrows he would have raised them at this little revelation. I just gave what I choose to think is a mysterious smile, and said nothing. Angel giggled, then said, "Did Matthew ever find out about that time we smuggled the Shetland pony on board?"*

*This was news to me, but I maintained the enigmatic smile, letting them think I was well aware of all their nefarious activities. A Shetland pony? Why the hell had they wanted a Shetland pony on board? And where had they kept the animal? Thinking about it, that may have explained a strangely agricultural smell that had pervaded the bullet car tubes for a while a few years back, then just as suddenly disappeared. Everyone had tried to tell me I was imagining it at the time, but my nose never lies to me, unlike some members of my crew.*

*I sat back and listened as the storytelling went on over dinner, with Lily revealing that she knew a lot more about what her children got up to than they had ever realized. The children were great fun. All were intelligent and articulate, despite their different temperaments.*

*Faylinn was as fiery and challenging as ever, never willing to let a false assumption go past her, and never backward in giving her opinion on any subject. But she did it with charm and intelligence, and never gave offence, although I could see her more peaceable brother, Dasha, wincing on occasion.*

*Naima said little but listened intently, following all the discussions going on around the large oval table with wide eyes. When she felt she had something constructive to say she got involved, and when she did speak, it was with passion and energy. I found myself feeling more proud of this unacknowledged child of mine with every moment that passed.*

*I wasn't the only person at the table sitting back and quietly observing. Delenn and Ivanova said little, but listened and responded when directly questioned. Deborah was also unusually subdued, which worried me a little. She was normally more lively in a group of people with whom she was familiar.*

*I became even more concerned when Lily rose, saying it was time for the children to go to bed. The children's chorus of complaints were met by a raised eyebrow from their mother, and a stern look from both fathers, at which point all three got up at once, bid us all good night politely, and started to follow their mother from the room. I was surprised when Deborah also rose from her seat and said she had a slight headache.*

*"If you'll all excuse me, I think I'll follow the children's example and have an early night."*

*My wife did look a little pale, so I went to rise and join her, but she laid her hand on my shoulder and pressed me gently back into my seat. "It's nothing, Matthew. Don't worry. Stay and enjoy the company." With that, she was gone.*

*I watched the door close behind her and frowned, wondering whether I should go after her, but then John asked me a question about our upcoming mission, and I turned to answer, thinking that I would follow Deborah as soon as I could, but it would be impolite to leave before our guests.*

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*It was a couple of hours later before John, Luke and I bade our guests farewell at the doors of the landing bay. Jack, Angel, G'Tan and No'Kar had gone back to the Angel's Rest, while Deleenn and Ivanova shuttled back down to Minbar. I walked back to the bullet car tube with John and Luke, then decided I'd walk a little further before turning in.*

*That's one of the great things about the Excalibur. There are corridors stretching for kilometers, giving lots of room for a restless Captain to stretch his legs when he couldn't sleep at night. Moving through the ship brought back memories of those times I had prowled these corridors all those years before, when worries about my crew and my mission had kept me awake into the early hours of the morning.*

*That was back before I married Deborah. Once she joined me in my bed, I'd never had sleepless nights again.*

*There were a few crewmembers going about their business even at this late hour, but I recognized none of them. It had been over ten years since I had commanded this ship, and most of my crew had moved onward and upward in their careers since then.*

*Just this last year, John had finally persuaded Christina Jackson, his first officer for the last ten years, to accept her own command. It had been offered several times before, but Christina had declined the opportunity, preferring to stay on the Excalibur.*

*Now she was Captain of a corvette and Sangeetha Siddhartha, the Excalibur's Communication Officer, had gone with her. The two of them had finally married in the New Year, and we had all traveled to Mars to join in the celebrations. It had been one hell of a party.*

*As I prowled back toward my quarters, I realized that John had been Captain of this ship for longer than I had. Very few of the crew now on board would even recognize me. It was a sobering thought. How quickly people forget.*

*Once I had been the savior of Earth and all humanity. Now I was a grouchy middle aged stranger, to be viewed with a little suspicion as I appeared in areas of the ship that I shouldn't really enter. I wondered why none of them challenged me, a question that was answered as I turned a corner and entered the Engineering Department.*

*A crew member I had never seen before was on duty and she looked up as she heard my footsteps. She nodded, smiled and said, "Captain," then went back to monitoring her station.*

*I acknowledged with a sketchy salute, and smiled to myself as I moved on. Maybe people's memories were better than I thought. Suddenly, my restlessness deserted me. I found that I didn't want to walk any further. I wanted to go home. Not to my home on Earth, not to the house where I lived, but to the only real home that mattered to me. The home my wife created just by her presence. The home of Deborah's arms.*





*I made straight for the next bullet car entrance, grateful that my memories of the layout of the Excalibur were so ingrained that I could have found the shortest route between any two points in the ship blindfold.*

*Within minutes, I palmed the door to our quarters open. They hadn't changed much since we'd left over ten years before. John had told me he'd never felt comfortable with the idea of converting them back to regular crew quarters, so he'd kept them for guests. Which is exactly what we were, and guests who were very grateful that John had also kept the shielding in place that allowed us to make love without Deborah's sendings affecting the whole of the crew.*

*With this in mind I was smiling as I headed straight for the bedroom, hoping that Deborah's headache had passed. The door was slightly ajar, allowing the dim light my wife had left on in the living room to cast a soft glow across the bed. I*

*paused as I saw Deborah, puzzled by the unfamiliarity of her pose.*

*My wife wore a black satin negligee, in itself not unusual, except that she normally only wore it before we went to bed, just to give me something to remove during our love making. Now she lay, curled into a fetal position, hugging my pillow to her chest, crying softly.*

*She looked up as I entered the room, and her eyes were twin pools of loss and pain as she whispered, "Matthew."*

*I moved quickly to the bed and sat next to her. Deborah pushed the pillow aside, and threw herself at me, hugging me tightly, as I held her, stroking her hair and trying to comfort her as she whispered over and over again, "Don't leave me, Matthew. Please, never, never leave me."*

*Deborah was distraught and it took me a long time to calm her enough for her to become coherent. Again and again I told her how much I loved her, and that I would never leave her. Finally, she calmed enough to give me an explanation for her distress.*

*"All through dinner, I could feel Delenn and Susan. They hurt so much, Matthew. I couldn't block it. They looked at you and me, at Jack and Angel, at all of us, and their sense of loss was overwhelming. They're both so lonely, Matthew. So lonely."*

*Deborah started to cry again, and I held her tightly, kissing her hair and whispering my love for her, trying to banish the pain and the loss from her mind.*

*I felt useless. Clumsy and inept. Nothing I could say or do would assuage the memory of the loss Deborah had felt. The two women who together pretty much ran the ISA had experienced grief*

*unlike anything I could imagine. If I lost Deborah, if I lost my family, I have no idea how I would survive. Yet somehow Delenn and Ivanova went on. Delenn had lost her soul mate when John Sheridan had 'died'. And Susan had lost Marcus Cole not once, but twice, the second time after she had acknowledged her love for him, and finally allowed herself to be loved.*

*Where did these women find the strength to go on? I had no idea. I just knew that I never wanted to know the depth of their grief, never wanted to experience that kind of loss. Deborah's pain washed over me and for just a brief moment I had some glimmer of what my alter-ego, Jack Gideon, must have felt when he lost all his friends and his world. I never wanted to experience that feeling again.*

*Our lovemaking that night had an intensity about it that was heartbreaking. Deborah straddled me, needing to see me, to touch me, and to constantly reassure herself. Her tears wet my chest, falling from her face as we made love. When we were sated, we lay quietly and I held her close, trying to make her feel safe and secure.*

*I held Deborah in my arms and rocked her gently, reassuring her again and again that I would never leave her, that she would never lose me, and that we would stay at each other's sides until death parted us. That was the vow I made when I married her and I meant every word of it.*

*I still do.*

---

*6<sup>th</sup> May 2284*

*We still had a couple of days to wait for the last of our White Star fleet to join us at Minbar, and Vya insisted that Jack and I should allow him to take us on a personally conducted tour of the Ranger training complex. I'd visited the compound on more than one occasion before, but I decided it would be interesting to see Jack's reaction to a place long ago destroyed in his home universe. Also, Vya's enthusiasm had been irresistible and he reminded me of Oscar, when our dog had been a puppy. I'd never been able to say 'no' to him, either.*

*So I'd arranged to shuttle down to Minbar, when Deborah surprised me by saying she'd like to join me. Now don't get me wrong. Deborah wanting to go somewhere with me wasn't the surprise. We both prefer for her to accompany me whenever she can. I know, after nearly fifteen years of marriage you'd have thought we would have been glad of some time apart, but somehow it never worked like that. I miss her when she's not around and she says she misses me, too. Stupid, eh?*

*No, what was surprising was Deborah's desire to visit the Ranger complex. The place held bad memories for us, of a time when my wife had first discovered that she held a part of a Vorlon consciousness inside her. That discovery had nearly broken Deborah, and for a while I'd thought I would lose her as a result. We'd spent a few days at the Ranger training ground immediately after the failed mission to Centauri Prime which was when the Vorlon had emerged from its hiding place inside Deborah's mind. My wife had avoided the place ever since.*

*"Are you sure?" I'd looked up in surprise as Deborah had entered our bedroom, making her announcement just as I was fastening my boots.*

*"Yes. It's about time I faced that place again. It's been over ten years after all, and nothing really bad happened there." My wife had smiled down at me from where she stood, leaning against the doorway. I'd stood and moved over to take her in my arms, kissing her gently, letting her feel my love for her.*

*"As long as you're sure. Maybe you can keep Angel in line, as Jack tells me she plans to join us, too."*

*Deborah had laughed. "Don't expect miracles. I don't think anyone has ever managed to keep Angel completely under control. God knows you tried hard enough when we lived on the Excalibur."*

*I'd snorted my agreement and steered Deborah out of our quarters and toward the landing bay.*

*So there we were, riding a shuttle down to Minbar, with Trace Miller piloting, Jack in the co-pilot's position and me riding shotgun in the center seat. Deborah and Angel sat behind us in silence, but that didn't mean they weren't plotting something. Those sisters could communicate mentally using something akin to telepathy, but not quite the same. John had once told me that it operated on a different wavelength to that used by human telepaths. He could tell when they were linked, but couldn't listen in on them. That was annoying as it would have been useful to be able to eavesdrop on the sisters when they were plotting. Or is that just me being nosy again?*

*You don't have to answer that.*

*Trace brought us into a perfect landing on the square in the center of the camp and lowered the ramp for us to exit. When I saw the attractive human female Ranger standing next to Vya, I understood why Trace had been so eager to volunteer to fly us down.*

*In the fifteen plus years I'd known Trace he'd changed very little. He'd never settled down with one woman, always preferring to play the field. He still looked good for a man in his late forties, so he was still getting away with murder where the ladies were concerned. Of course, this is coming from a man in his late fifties, and I think I look even better for my age than Trace. But then I'm biased.*

*I looked across at my wife and thought how beautifully she'd aged. There was silver amongst the gold of her hair now, and little lines at the corners of her eyes but she still looked younger than her years. Not her true years of course. If you counted from the day she was born, Deborah was now over 300 years old. But in terms of the years she'd lived, my wife was then in her mid-forties and as lovely as ever. Her body was still long and lean, with curves in all the right places. Her breasts may not have been as high and firm as when we'd first met, but she worked at keeping her belly flat and her butt firm. Deborah was still the most beautiful woman in the universe to me.*

*But only just.*

*Looking at Angel, trotting down the ramp ahead of us with her arm linked through Jack's, the sway of her beautiful butt enhanced by the tight black pants and short red jacket she wore, it was a close run thing.*

*Vya was waiting for us at the bottom of the ramp, his face lit up in an eager smile. Today he wore his natural appearance, with golden skin and purple hair, the bright blue eyes he'd inherited from*

*his father sparkling with excitement.*

*Trace disappeared with his friend, leaving the rest of us to sort ourselves out. It soon became apparent that Angel had no intention of joining us on our guided tour. She kissed Jack quickly but passionately, then said she had an appointment and skipped away from us, disappearing around the corner of one of the training buildings. I watched her with narrowed eyes, suspicious about what she was up to. When Angel gets mysterious, it's usually bad news for bystanders.*

*Jack didn't seem to share my suspicions, but was talking with Vya, asking about the compound. I tried to tell myself this was none of my business. Angel was Jack's wife, not mine.*

*But he didn't know her like I did. He hadn't lived with her for years, as I had, on board the Excalibur.*

*Deborah broke into my brooding by patting my arm and whispering, "Stop worrying. Angel will be fine and Jack trusts her. Leave it alone."*

*I bit my lip and didn't voice my thought that Jack was stupid if he trusted Angel, and Gran and Gramps Gideon hadn't raised any stupid kids as far as I was aware, no matter what universe they inhabited.*

*Vya and Jack started off across the compound while I lingered with Deborah, asking her, "Are you coming with us? I know you've seen most of this place, but it will be interesting to see how it's changed over the last few years."*

*Deborah shook her head and pointed across the open courtyard to a round building on the far side. The human Rangers called it 'The Chapel'; it was a place of peace and meditation. The cool breeze that blew across the courtyard stirred the wind chimes hanging there into a soft, melodious tune that could be heard more clearly once Vya and Jack's voices had faded into the distance. There was something about the Ranger training camp that seemed to absorb voices and discordant sounds, making it peaceful and silent most of the time.*

*"I thought I'd go in there for a while." Deborah's voice was quiet, barely audible above the twittering of the temshwee's, the bird-like creatures that nested in the trees surrounding the courtyard. "I'd like to see that statue of Valen again."*

*I lifted my hand to Deborah's cheek, sliding my thumb across her cheekbone. She turned her face into my caress and closed her eyes, sighing deeply with pleasure at my touch. I leaned forward to kiss her forehead, then said, equally softly, "OK. Call me on my commlink when you've had enough quiet. You know you can rely on me to disturb the peace."*

*That brought a chuckle from my wife, who kissed my cheek, then turned to cross the courtyard. I watched as she walked away, enjoying the sway of her hips in her tight black jeans, watching until she disappeared inside the Chapel. I had just turned and started to follow the path Vya and Jack had taken when I hesitated. I decided I didn't really want a guided tour. I'd prefer to wander the pathways by myself, enjoying the tranquility of the camp. It was, after all, a beautiful place.*

*Built high up in the hills above Tuzanor, a city known to the Minbari as the City of Sorrows, the Ranger camp was lush with vegetation, watered and tended carefully by the trainee Rangers and their teachers. Buildings were spaced elegantly around the verdant gardens, with paths winding through secret bowers, leading into unexpected open courtyards, where a Ranger might be sitting alone, reading or meditating, or a class might be taking place in the use of the Denn'bok, the deadly fighting staff. Walking around the Ranger camp, one never knew what one might come across.*

*As I emerged from a path sheltered by flowering plants that climbed the trellises on either side and met overhead, I came across something that I'd rather not have seen.*

*In the middle of the small terrace ahead of me was a fountain, the waters from which were lifted by the breeze, creating a cool haven from the hot sun. Next to the fountain stood two people, holding each other tightly.*

*One of those people was my sister-in-law, Angel. The other was not her husband, Jack.*

*I recognized the man holding Angel immediately. He was a former lover of hers, a Ranger called Mal Fillion, who captained a small trading ship called the Lion, and who was one of the Rangers most effective undercover operatives. Twice he had come aboard the Excalibur on missions that had led us into great danger, and each time he had found his way into Angel's bed. Neither action had endeared the man to me.*

*The couple obviously hadn't heard my footsteps as I'd approached, so for a moment I hesitated, wondering if I should retreat. Then I decided that it would be better if I interrupted them.*

*OK, so I admit that the sight of Angel held tightly in another man's arms still annoys the hell out of me. I can just about cope with that other man being Jack Gideon, as he's just another form of me, really. But watching Mal Fillion hold her and stroke her raven hair irked me more than a little.*

*I cleared my throat and the couple opened their eyes and looked over at me.*

*Fillion nodded his head, saying, "Captain." That was the only response from either of them. Angel said nothing, just looking at me in silence, her crystal blue eyes full of sadness.*

*I shook my head. "Ambassador, not Captain. If it was Captain Gideon who'd just walked in here to see you holding his wife, you'd be a dead man by now."*



*Angel sighed and moved for the first time, disengaging herself gently from Fillion's arms. "Matt, stop it. You don't understand."*

*I interrupted her before she could continue. "I understand enough to know that you arranged a liaison with a lover, behind your husband's back, Angel. Deborah told me that Jack trusts you.*

*Seems like a pretty dumb thing to do in the circumstances."*

*Angel shook her head impatiently, stepping away from Fillion, and moving toward me with her hands on her hips, glowering at me. "Matt, you always think the worst. If I'd wanted a quick fuck with Mal, don't you think I would have chosen somewhere a little more private? That's not what this is about. Can't you tell the difference between friendship and sex?"*

*I had to admit she had a point. Angel isn't stupid, and anyone could have walked in on them on their terrace. Maybe I'd jumped to conclusions, but given Angel's past record with this man, who can blame me?*

*I turned to Fillion and asked, "So what are you doing back here at camp, Fillion? Where's the Lion and the rest of your crew?"*

*Angel's sharp intake of breath warned me that I'd asked the wrong question. Fillion's eyes filled with pain as he answered quietly, "Dead. They're all dead, Ambassador," he made the title a curse, "Dead and gone, years ago, as I'm sure you know."*

*Fillion's fists clenched and his face filled with anger. I'd obviously hit a raw nerve, and I braced myself for a fight as he started to move toward me.*

*The prospect of a fist fight with Fillion didn't exactly thrill me. He was bigger and heavier than me, but even so, in what I consider to be a fair fight I could have thrashed him, as I always cheat. Regrettably, I suspected that Fillion knew nearly as many ways to fight dirty as I do.*

*Fortunately for the arrangement of my features, which I happen to like just the way they are, Angel butted in, turning to face Fillion and placing her hands on his chest, halting his approach. "I never told him, Mal. He never knew about your visit to me, and Alwyn getting you off Earth. It was private, just between you and me, so I never told my family."*

*Fillion stopped and looked down at the small beauty in front of him. The rage left his face, to be replaced by sadness.*

*I said quietly, "I'm sorry to hear that. They were good people." I meant what I said. Fillion's crew had been Rangers like himself, and I had fond memories of his engineer and second in command, Teri Stewart. She had been a warm, vibrant woman, with a wicked sense of humor and a true joie de vivre. If Teri was dead, the universe was a sorrier place without her.*

*Nevertheless, I wanted to hear more about Fillion's mysterious previous visit with Angel on Earth, and Alwyn's involvement, but I decided that could wait until later.*

*I think Fillion heard the sincerity in my voice, and he looked up at me and gave a sad smile. "They were all of that. I still miss them. When I heard you and your family were coming here, I contacted Angel and asked her to meet me. She refused at first, telling me that she was married now, and that she would never betray her husband. I begged her for just a few moments of her time. I haven't seen Angel since the day Alwyn took me away from Earth, and I'll probably never see her again. Try to understand why I wanted to see her one last time, to hold her just once more."*

*This still didn't sit comfortably with me, but I nodded anyway. "I guess I can try to do that. But I think it's time that Angel went back to her husband, don't you?"*

*I looked at Angel and for a moment her eyes flashed with annoyance at my presumption. Then she looked at Fillion and for the first time, she saw what I had seen. Fillion loved her more than he should. He wanted her in a way no longer possible. Angel may have been motivated by wanting to do a kindness for an old friend, but Fillion had wanted much more. But he could never have that now.*

*Looking at Angel, and seeing her reaction to her new knowledge, I realized that Jack was right to trust her. Angel loved her husband as completely as Deborah loved me, and she would never betray that love.*

*Angel lifted her hand and touched Fillion's lips, smiling sadly. "Matt's right. It's time I went. Take care of yourself, Mal." Standing on tiptoe, she brushed his lips lightly with her mouth, then turned and ran from the terrace, leaving me to watch a man whose heart and spirit seemed broken.*

*Fillion turned away from me, walking to the fountain, where he dabbled his fingers in the water for a while. I watched in silence, knowing there was nothing I could say or do to ease his pain. There was only one thing I could do to help him at that moment, which was to leave.*

*"Good luck with whatever mission you have next, Ranger Fillion." I spoke to the Ranger's back, and he didn't turn or acknowledge my words, so I left quietly, retreating back along the path I'd walked down earlier. Part of me wished I'd never chosen that route; that I'd never seen what I'd seen. But another part of me was glad. My intervention had given Angel the chance to see what she needed to see, and to leave, quickly, before things had gone too far.*

*As I walked back toward the Chapel, I decided I wanted to be with Deborah. It seemed that this trip to Minbar was fated to be filled with lonely people, and I wanted to hold my wife and remind myself that as long as she was by my side, I would never be as lonely as the man I had just left behind me, or his bosses, Delenn and Ivanova.*

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*It was nearly mid-day when I emerged from the sinuous paths that wound through the Ranger compound gardens, back into the large open square around which the main training buildings stood. The open space was silent and deserted, with the sun beating down vertically, casting few shadows. It was the height of summer in this hemisphere of Minbar, although the latitude of Tuzanor, and its position on the north facing slopes of a mountain range, prevented the temperatures from ever getting uncomfortably high. Nevertheless, I was glad of the cool breeze that blew across the plateau and through the open square, lifting the dust from the paving stones into miniature tornados, just like the dust devils we sometimes see in the deserts of Earth.*

*My footsteps echoed from the sides of the buildings as I walked across to the Chapel, but as soon as I entered, the silence seemed to swallow all noise. Although the flooring looked like stone, it absorbed the sound of my movements as I threaded through the pillars that formed an outer ring around the central atrium. At first, all I could hear was the faint tinkling of distant wind-chimes, but as I moved closer to the center of the structure, to my surprise, I heard voices.*



*I stopped beside a pillar and looked out into the atrium, where I saw two women sitting side by side on a stone bench in front of a statue. For a moment, I paused and smiled, enjoying the view of my wife's back. She had left her hair loose that day, so her long, blonde curls cascaded down her back almost to her waist. The sun pouring through the upper windows was broken into a spectrum by the multi-hued panes of glass, creating a rainbow of color that made Deborah's hair shimmer with light.*

*The woman next to her looked very different. Her dark hair was tightly bound, creating a matt, dense surface from which no color was reflected. Both women were tall and slender, but Deborah's clothes showed her female curves, while Ivanova's robes concealed whatever femininity she retained.*

*They were speaking softly, and it took me a little while to pick out the words enough to realize they were talking about the statue in front of them. Or more accurately, about the man it represented.*

*"...more intellectual, more cerebral than John Sheridan. When John needed to get away from it all, he'd go down to the baseball pitch and slug at balls until he got whatever it was out of his system. Jeff would retreat to his quarters and read poetry. He loved poetry, particularly Tennyson. I used to tease him about that, telling him he was sentimental, and he should try reading more Russian poets, but these days I find myself reading the last few lines of Ulysses and thinking that maybe Jeff knew what he was talking about."*

*Deborah's voice was low as she quoted softly:*

*"Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."*

*The words filled me with sadness and hope, as they described the process of growing old so well, a process with which I was becoming all too familiar, but nevertheless the lines expressed the determination never to let age interfere with doing what needed to be done. I hadn't known that Ulysses had been Jeffrey Sinclair's favorite poem, but my respect and liking for the man, long lost in time, increased with the knowledge.*

*Deborah paused after her recitation, then asked, "Did he still want more adventures? Was that what made him go back in time? What made him accept the change the Vorlons offered?"*

*I'd never heard my wife's voice so steady when she talked about the beings that had kidnapped her and her sisters, tortured them, changed them, then abandoned them, leaving a part of one of them in Deborah's head, to drive her to the edge of insanity. I wondered where she had found this new calm, but my curiosity was diverted by Ivanova's response.*

*"Some of that perhaps, but not all. I think Jeff's main reason for accepting his fate, for being willing to fight another war, was that he was looking for the woman he loved, and he thought he could find her in the past." Ivanova went on to explain that Sinclair's fiancée, a woman named Catherine Sakai, had been lost in Sector 14, that part of space where weird things happened, where*



*time and space somehow got twisted and from where my doppelganger, Jack Gideon, had emerged several years before.*

*Ivanova went on, "I think Jeff somehow knew she was there, waiting for him in the past, and he had to go back and find her. Marcus..." For a moment the dark haired woman's voice cracked, and she had to pause and clear her throat before she continued, "Marcus showed me a letter he'd been given after we stole Babylon 4 and sent it back with Jeff on board. It was written on very old paper, but it was definitely Jeff's handwriting, so we think he wrote it after he arrived on Minbar a thousand years ago, then made sure it was preserved to be delivered to Marcus at the right time. We know he did the same thing with letters to himself and Delenn, so there's no reason Marcus' letter shouldn't have been genuine."*

*There was a long pause before Deborah asked softly, "What did the letter say? Or is it private?"*

*Ivanova gave a creaky laugh. It sounded out of practice, something she didn't do often any more. "Jeff's been dead a thousand years. If you know where he went and who he became, privacy is hardly an issue. Even if your husband is eavesdropping on us."*

*I stepped forward, wondering how Ivanova had detected my presence. I'd entered silently, and she'd had her back turned to me. I was sure Deborah had sensed my arrival, as her empathic powers would have picked up my feelings, but I'd hoped to remain unnoticed by Ivanova for a little longer.*

*Yes, I know what that makes me.*

*Nosy.*

*The two women turned and looked at me as I walked toward them, and Deborah shifted nearer to Ivanova to make room for me on the end of the bench. I sat next to my wife, taking her hand and squeezing it gently as I smiled past her at Ivanova and said, "I didn't want to interrupt you. So what did the letter say?"*

*Ivanova nodded her acknowledgment of my presence, apparently not angered by my eavesdropping, and said softly, "I memorized the words. I knew they were the last thing I'd ever see of Jeff's, so I hung onto the memory. Sometimes it feels like I spend my life hanging onto memories of things I've lost..."*

*Ivanova's voice faded to silence, and I didn't know what to say. Deborah remained silent, and it was a few moments before Ivanova cleared her throat and continued her story.*

*"The letter said:*

*'From both of us, our thanks and friendship. Continue to dream that better future... where perhaps we'll meet again.'*

*Which just goes to show that Jeff may have been the savior of the Minbari but he was a lousy prophet. Marcus is dead and gone, and Jeff never came back to meet him in this or any other future."*

*The words were cold and toneless, spoken without bitterness, but even I could feel the pain that lay beneath them, the unexpressed anger at having lost what mattered most, the bitterness of thinking that Jeff Sinclair had found his love despite every barrier that space and time could raise between them, while she had lost the only man she had ever truly loved.*

*Deborah turned away from me to look at Ivanova, saying softly, "You don't know that. Jeff Sinclair didn't give up on his love just because she seemed lost. He went out and looked for her, even though he had to go a thousand years into the past to find her. Marcus' body has never been found. We don't know he's dead. He may just be lost."*

*As she spoke, I felt a sense of calmness, a warmth and compassion, stealing over me. I squeezed Deborah's hand tightly, knowing that she must be feeling all Ivanova's pain intensely, and she was trying to counter it by gently projecting more positive emotions.*



*Ivanova stood abruptly, whirling on her heel to glare down at us as we sat. "Stop it. Stop reading me and stop trying to change what I feel. I know what you are, and I'm enough of a telepath myself to know what you're doing. Leave my feelings alone and leave me some privacy."*

*With that she stormed out of the chapel, leaving Deborah and me sitting sadly, still looking at the statue of the Minbari who looked nothing like Jeff Sinclair.*

*I hadn't known that Ivanova was a telepath. I wondered how she'd manage to conceal that from Psi Corps when she was growing up, as she must have done, or she'd never have been allowed to serve in Earthforce back in the bad old days before the Psi Corps was dismantled.*

*Deborah and I sat in the silence left by Ivanova's departure for a few moments then Deborah sighed, "I thought it might do her good to talk about Marcus. I thought I could help. It was stupid of me. I really should learn not to stick my nose into other people's business."*

*I squeezed her hand again, and lifted my fingers to her chin, pulling her head around gently until I could look directly into her warm, brown eyes. Running my thumb along her cheekbone, I smiled then leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose.*

*"It's a very pretty nose and it was worth a try. And I think you're right. It would do Ivanova good if she could let go of some of that anger and pain. But I think we all have to accept that Marcus is gone."*

*Deborah opened her mouth to speak but I raised my hand and stopped her. "I know, I know. You and Angel aren't convinced, and you won't be until you see his body. I know that you and your sisters had some kind of weird connection to Marcus, after having given him part of your life*

*force, and I know you've said you'd feel it if he died, but if he's still alive, where the hell is he? It's been over five years, Deborah. I can't believe that he wouldn't have found his way home by now if he were still alive."*

*Deborah smiled at me and stood, pulling me to my feet to stand alongside her. She put her arms around my neck and leaned in to kiss me gently, before saying softly, "Remember Sinclair's favorite poem?" She nodded toward the statue that loomed over us. "Ulysses took ten years to find his way home, and Penelope never gave up on him. I wish Ivanova could have such faith."*

*I looked deep into the hazel depths of my wife's eyes, seeing the love and passion there, knowing that if I were to be lost, she would never cease looking, that she would search the planets, the moons and the stars, never accepting her loss. On Inesbitrin she had refused to leave, somehow knowing that I was still alive when everyone else had given up hope.*

*Lifting my hand to caress Deborah's face again, for a moment I rejoiced in everything I had. What had I done to deserve so much? Why did I have this woman, my children, my family, my friends, my home and my life, when others had so little? I couldn't help but think of Delenn, of Ivanova, and even of Mal Fillion, of their loneliness and of what they'd lost, while I still had so much.*

*I drew my wife into a tight embrace, telling myself never to take this for granted, but to treasure every moment we had together, as we could never know how many or how few of those moments were left to us.*

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*The next few days were spent happily on board the Excalibur as our fleet made its way to Nabula. Ivanova's White Stars were all newer models, which could nearly match the Excalibur's top speed, so the journey went quickly. Susan stayed on board her ship, and contact between the fleet was restricted to comm channels only, as shuttle transfers between ships when traveling through hyperspace are only carried out in emergencies. There's just too much risk of shuttles getting dragged into gravitational eddies and being lost.*

*That gave those of us on the Excalibur a few days of leisure to enjoy the facilities offered by the large ship, including one major improvement that had been made since my day.*

*The Excalibur's water tanks had been extended significantly, allowing real water showers and tubs to be installed in guest and officer quarters.*

*There's nothing Deborah and I enjoy more than a little soapy fun in the shower or tub, and I have to admit we took full advantage of the new facilities. We also took advantage of something we had left behind when I'd retired.*

*Deborah's motor bike.*

*It was still running perfectly, stored in the bullet car tubes, and carefully maintained by John during his off-duty hours. He told us that Dasha often helped him these days, and the teenager was eagerly awaiting the first time his father would let him ride the bike alone, something John planned to allow on Dasha's sixteenth birthday the following year.*

*I guess the difference in the way in which John and I planned to help our sons celebrate their sixteenth birthdays might tell you something about both of us. Just don't tell me what conclusion you draw, OK? I suspect I wouldn't like it.*

*Thanks. You had to say it anyway, didn't you?*

*No, Uncle Matt is not a lecherous deviant. I have more things on my mind than sex.*

*Saving the universe, for example.*

*People always think the worst of me.*

*Deborah and I borrowed the keys to the bike a couple of times and had a whole lot of fun fooling around on it. Fortunately, we're both still very limber for our respective ages, as making love on a motorbike requires both agility and flexibility.*

*Of course the biggest problem about us making love in the bullet car tubes was the effect Deborah's sendings had on the crew. Most species can cope with the libidinous impact of my wife's projected orgasms, but the Narn have real problems. They can't resist the urge to have sex that the sendings produce, but they have no effective means of birth control. This is how we'd ended up with eleven pouchlings on board the Excalibur when I was Captain.*

*Those little Narns--not so little now, as they were nearly thirteen Earth years old--were growing up happily on Narn with most of their parents, but I didn't want to be responsible for another population explosion on the Excalibur. It was already costing me a small fortune in regular birthday gifts for the eleven pouchlings for whom I had been nominated as the Narn equivalent of 'god-father', which was only fair as I was largely responsible for their birth. I didn't need any additions to my financial responsibilities, thank you very much!*

*Fortunately, when we'd checked the crew roster for the Excalibur, we'd discovered that there were no Narns serving on the ship at that time. That puzzled me a little, and I decided I'd query it with John at some point, but for the moment, it freed me and Deborah from the necessity for restraint when we went riding the motor bike, and each other.*

*Behavioral restraint that is. Physical restraints were another thing, and they are none of your business whatsoever.*

*Oh, what the hell. So we like a little light bondage now and then. So sue us.*

*In case you're wondering about G'Tan and No'Kar, they're safe. G'Tan is beyond the age at which male Narn breed, so he and his partner can copulate until the cows come home, with no harm done. Apart from whatever residual soreness they might suffer that is. Those scales have to rub, I would have thought. I have no plans on finding out first-hand.*

*You can imagine that between soapy sex in the shower and banging our butts off on the bike, the days of the journey to Nabula flew by.*

*Maybe one day Deborah and I will lose interest in sex. It will be the same day they put us into the ground.*

*And they'll probably have to bury us together, as we'll die with me buried deep inside her, and her legs clamped tight around my butt.*

*That'll give the undertaker a challenge!*

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*12th May 2284*

*What should I say about Nabula? Grandma Gideon always told me that if you can't say something nice, then you shouldn't say anything at all. Well, if I followed that piece of advice, this story would soon be over, because I'm damned if I can think of a single nice thing to say about that planet or its inhabitants.*

*The place stank.*

*Literally.*

*So did its inhabitants.*

*All of them. All of the time.*

*When Vya had shown us what they'd looked like, he'd held back on that one joyous element of their physical make-up. The Nabulans exuded a natural oil which lubricated their scales. It smelled like fish that had been dead for a week.*

*I'm somewhat superstitious about bad smells. It comes from my experiences on Stryvstextix, where the natives appeared friendly, but eventually turned on us and nearly destroyed the Excalibur. Their planet had smelled like rotten eggs, and I'd never felt comfortable around bad smells ever since.*

*Bad smells were bad omens to me, but I tried to put my superstitions to one side and take the Nabulans at face value. Not that their faces were particularly appealing, either.*

*Learning from my previous experiences, soon after arrival in the Nabulans' main city, I discretely called up a request to John on the Excalibur to set up a decontamination area inside the landing bay. There was no way he'd want that smell pervading his ship.*

*The team I took down with me on that first day was small. Trace piloted us again, carrying me, Vya and Jack down to the planet, with three of the Excalibur's Marines as bodyguards. Ivanova stayed on her White Star in orbit, but our commlinks were permanently open to her and to John on the Excalibur. If anything went wrong, I wanted the Calvary on call.*

*We took translation devices with us, as the only human translator I'd ever felt I could trust had been, ironically, Max Eilerson, and after his departure from the Excalibur, I'd learned to rely on his replacement, a Minbari called Dunall, but she had left the ship a few months after me. In the intervening years the technology behind the translation devices had progressed in leaps and bounds (with Max Eilerson being the major contributor in their development, making himself even richer as a result. As if he needed more credits!) and they were now about as reliable as they could get. The only irritating thing about them was that I could still hear the Nabulans speaking--or more accurately, screeching--underneath the sound of the translation which was fed directly into my ear.*

*The first day was long, tedious and hot. Very hot. By the end of the day, I wasn't sure who stank worse, the humans or the Nabulans. Even Jack smelled bad to me, and as he smells just like me, I knew I must be reeking.*

*The Nabulans dragged us all around their city, showing us various impressive buildings, the use of most of which remained obscure. The exception was a concert hall where they put on a performance of what they considered to be music.*

*I would rather sit through a complete fifteen hour long Narn opera than endure that again.*

*The limited range of Nabulan hearing made the 'music' unbelievably dull, and I can only assume they have a different appreciation of melody to that which most ISA members consider appealing. I've heard cat screeches that sounded more harmonious.*

*By the time Jack and I returned to the ship, our ears hurt, our heads ached, and we stank. And we'd achieved absolutely nothing.*

*The Nabulans were masters at talking--loudly and with irritating harshness of tone--continuously while saying nothing at all. The only useful piece of information we'd obtained--if you could call it useful--was that the Nabulans had no idea what the species attacking our shipping looked like. All their contacts with that race had been through sound channels only.*

*I can only assume that the attackers had never heard Nabulan music over those channels. If they had, they'd have wiped the Nabulans off the planet as a favor to the eardrums of the rest of the galaxy.*

*OK, so that's just wishful thinking and mean.*

*If you'd spent as much time with the Nabulans as I did, you'd be feeling mean too.*

*If you've got the impression that I didn't really take to the Nabulans, you're right. I disliked the scaly bastards from the start. Maybe that makes me a lousy diplomat, but at least I've got better at concealing my feelings over the years, after intensive training from my wife.*

*So Jack, Vya and I returned to the Excalibur at the end of the first day, hot, tired and with pounding heads. After stripping and vibing in the landing bay, we proceeded to the conference room, where John awaited us, with Ivanova on screen from her Whitestar, via a heavily encoded channel.*

*The briefing didn't take long. Telling the others that we'd achieved nothing wasn't very time-consuming.*

*John then advised us that he'd spent his day equally unproductively.*

*"We've been trying to scan the surface of the planet since we arrived in orbit, but so far without success. Something is blocking all the Excalibur's sensors, and the Whitestars have had no more luck."*

*Ivanova pitched in over the comm-channel. "I don't like this. It implies a level of technology inconsistent with what we've seen so far. Is there anything you've seen on the planet, Ambassador, which might explain this block?"*

*I shook my head. "Nothing. But they could easily be hiding anything they wanted from us. The tour they took us on today only covered the ground they wanted to cover. It was all public buildings and places they wanted us to see. The city isn't huge, but there are a lot of places we never went near. And that's just the city. They could be hiding whole fleets of ships in the countryside around and about. It's mostly heavy jungle out there, and there's no way to see through the tree canopy when coming in to land."*

*We sat in silence for a while then started to discuss the next steps we should take. By the end of an hour we had an agreement on a three stage plan.*

*Stages one and two were straightforward. Jack would ask permission to start trade discussions with some of the merchants on the planet. That would allow him to investigate less official channels than I could reach. At the same time, the Excalibur would send out fighters to investigate the other continents of the planet--the ones not inhabited by the Nabulans--to see what we could find there, keeping the fighters close to the surface so the Nabulans wouldn't find out what we were up to. We hoped.*

*The third stage was tricky. It involved me persuading my wife to accompany me down to the planet for the next day's negotiations. I had a nasty feeling that Deborah might take one sniff at me--I wasn't convinced that I'd got all the stench of the planet out of my skin, despite vibing until I was pink--and dig her heels in.*

*If ever I needed all my diplomatic persuasiveness to complete a task, this was the time.*

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#### 17th May 2284

*I lay on the couch in our quarters, staring at the ceiling, grinding my teeth. Deborah was in the bedroom, with the door firmly shut, and I have no doubt that some serious teeth grinding was going on in there, too. I was busy wondering why it was always me who tries to sleep on the sofa after one of our fights.*

*Why didn't Deborah end up trying to get comfortable on a couch that was just a little too short? How come she kept the nice, cozy quilt, while I tried to wrap a scratchy blanket around my poor, tired and aching body? Didn't my head ache just as much as hers? Hadn't my nostrils suffered as much of an assault?*



*After five days spent trying to negotiate with the Nabulans, trying to make some progress in finding out exactly what was attacking our shipping, the only thing Deborah and I were in agreement on was how frustrated we both were.*

*Each day we'd come back to the ship feeling hot, tired and sick. Sick of the smells and the sounds. Sick of the heat and the damp. But mostly sick of the Nabulans, with their grating voices, their stench and their constant delaying tactics.*

*Deborah had told me after the first day that they were being evasive if not outright lying. Every meeting since had been a series of frustrations during which Deborah had sat at my side, sweating in the uncomfortable heat, getting increasingly irritable with the planet, its inhabitants and with me.*

*By the end of the fifth day, the irritation had exploded into a mammoth argument, during which Deborah had decided that I was to blame for all her discomfort. Apparently, it was my fault that the planet was too hot and sticky, my fault that the Nabulans stank, my fault that their voices constantly grated on her ears and my fault that they were brilliant at avoiding every way in which we tried to get information out of them.*

*I was therefore feeling very hard done by, as I punched the pillow that Deborah had flung at me when I had stormed out of our bedroom. I was also feeling pretty stupid. Why had I stormed out? If I'd let things go on a little longer, then maybe she would have stomped out of the bedroom, leaving the nice, comfortable bed for me.*

*I guess Deborah always did have a slightly longer fuse than me, and her self-control paid off sometimes, leaving her in possession of life's little comforts.*

*That little bit of self-awareness hardly helped my bad mood. Neither did the realization that I was pouting in a way that I would never have tolerated from my ten-year-old daughter.*

*I was just about to crawl out of my quagmire of self-pity when the door to the bedroom opened and a voice said very softly, "I'm sorry."*

*I bit down on the temptation to reply, "And so you should be," knowing it would hardly be constructive at that point, no matter how satisfying.*

*I looked up at my wife and couldn't help but smile. She stood in the doorway with her black robe held tightly around her, looking very chastened. Although we don't argue often, when we do, it gets pretty explosive, and I know Deborah always regrets losing her temper.*

*I held out my arms and said, "Come here," pulling the scratchy blanket aside to make room for her next to me on the couch.*

*Deborah trotted across the room and snuggled down next to me, resting her head on my shoulder. I kissed the top of her head, and whispered, "I'm sorry, too. It's been a rough few days, and I think we both need a break. Tomorrow we'll tell the Nabulans we're taking the day off. Then we can catch up with Jack and Angel and see how their trading is going. Maybe they're having more success than we are."*



*Deborah nodded and snuggled closer to me. I bit my tongue and didn't tell her that despite all the scrubbing, her hair still smelled of rotten fish.*

*See? I can be a diplomat.*

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*18th May 2284*

*The following morning Deborah and I scrubbed each other until there was no trace of the malodorous reek left on our bodies, then called Jack and Angel, asking them to join us for breakfast.*

*We hadn't seen much of them during the previous few days. Having gained the Nabulan authorities' permission to start trade discussions, they'd taken the Angel's Rest down to the planet, and spent the time since with local merchants, trying to identify trading opportunities, while picking up tidbits of information.*

*Vya had accompanied them, shifting into Narn form, and joining G'Tan and No'Kar in acting as their bodyguards. Not that they really needed much protection. Angel could look after herself, Jack, the ship, and I suspected even the Excalibur at a pinch. Her telekinetic powers had been strong enough to destroy a Technomage and his ship. A few Nabulans wouldn't present much of a challenge to her.*

*When Deborah and I had returned to the ship the previous evening, we'd been told that the Angel's Rest was on its way back up from the planet, and we'd planned to join Jack and Angel later in the evening. Then we'd had our falling out, and our plans had changed.*

*So now we prepared breakfast together, marital harmony fully restored.*

*For the moment.*

*When the door buzzer sounded, Deborah called out to let our guests enter. A minute later we both wished she hadn't. The aroma that surged in ahead of Jack and Angel was enough to make both of us step back, holding our noses.*

*"Pooh! You two stink!" Deborah was as subtle and tactful as ever.*

*Angel's face fell. "I know! We can't get the smell off us. Baby hasn't come out of Harry's room for the last two days. Hell, even Harry won't come out of his room! We've vibed and vibed, but the stink won't shift."*

*Jack put his arm around her shoulders and grinned at us. "But at least we've reached the point where we can't smell each other any more." He turned and kissed the top of Angel's head then looked over at us and smiled again. "So you two will just have to suffer. Anyway, surely you must smell just as bad? You've been down there as long as we have."*

*Deborah shook her head and strode forward, holding her nose with one hand and shooing Jack and Angel ahead of her with the other. Her usually sultry tones sounded nasal as she said, "Get*

*into the bathroom, strip and shower. There should be enough hot water left if you share. I'll get rid of those clothes and find you something else to wear. Now shoo! Get in there!"*

*I was laughing as Deborah chivied Jack and Angel along, looking exactly like a sheepdog rounding up a herd of wayward sheep. Don't ever tell her I compared her to a dog, OK? I like my anatomy arranged just the way it is.*

*Angel and Jack were both looking stunned at the revelation that we had a real water shower in our quarters, and I guessed we'd have some explaining to do about that later. I hung back, figuring if I kept well away, the smell wouldn't be quite so eye-wateringly bad, while wondering what Angel would look like wearing any of Deborah's clothes, given the difference in their sizes.*

*Having got them into our bedroom, Deborah turned and glared at me. "Make yourself useful and fetch the kitchen tongs. If I touch their clothes with my hands I'll get the smell on me, and I won't be able to cook breakfast."*

*I galloped into the kitchen like a racehorse on steroids. I like Deborah cooking my breakfast!*

*It was a full half hour later when Jack and Angel emerged. Jack wore a pair of my pants and a t-shirt. We're still pretty much the same size and it wasn't the first time Deborah had given him my clothes.*

*Angel's outfit was interesting. Deborah had given her a wrap around skirt, which was just below knee length on my wife, but went twice around Angel's waist and nearly reached her ankles. On top, Angel wore a red t-shirt of mine, which was baggy enough to slide off one beautifully curved shoulder. That allowed me to see that underneath she was wearing one of Deborah's bikinis; one with straps that tied around the back of her neck, making it totally adjustable. I remembered that the panties also had ties on either hip, as I'd enjoyed unfastening those bows on a number of occasions. I pushed aside the thought of what Angel would look like, sprawled on a bed while I loosened... Don't go there, Matt.*

*The red t-shirt was pulled in by a belt that also encircled Angel's tiny waist twice. Nevertheless, my sister-in-law looked damned good. With her wet hair pulled back into a pony tail, you'd never have guessed that she was now in her late thirties. She could have been ten or more years younger, and even without a lick of make-up on her face, she was still one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met.*

*As they joined us at the dining table, Deborah told them that she'd sent their clothes down to the laundry, and we started to eat. My wife had spoiled us all by making pancakes, which we ate with maple syrup, bacon and great gusto. Picking at fruit and toast afterwards, we sat back to enjoy the fresh brewed real coffee and to swap news.*

*"It's been a frustrating few days." Jack took a gulp of coffee then went on, "The Nabulans are keen to trade but not to talk. It's difficult to get them onto any subject other than the goods they have to sell. We were getting nowhere until yesterday, when just by chance, G'Tan and Angelique were in the right place at the right time to save one of their kids from getting badly hurt by some falling scaffolding."*

*Jack went on to tell us how Angel had seen the structure surrounding a new erected building start to disintegrate.*

*"I held it together with my mind just long enough for G'Tan to rush in, grab the child, and get it out of the way. Of course the Nabulans didn't know what I'd done; they just saw G'Tan save one of their children, so they treated him like a great hero, when of course he knew all along that he was in no danger, as I would never have let that scaffolding fall on him."*

*"Don't pout." Deborah teased her sister fondly. "We all know who the true hero was, so be satisfied with that."*

*Jack laughed and put his arm around Angel's shoulders again, kissing her cheek gently, in a way that threatened to raise my blood pressure. So I cleared my throat hurriedly and interrupted them.*

*"So what happened next?" I thought maybe if they went on with their story, they'd stop the kissy cuddly stuff.*

*I know, I know! Getting jealous of my alter-ego kissing my sister-in-law makes me a jerk. I've learned to live with it.*

*"They carried G'Tan, shoulder high, down the street to their equivalent of a local tavern. I have to say, he looked a bit nervous, having all those sharp claws and teeth snapping around so close to the parts of his anatomy he treasures most." Jack's grin was evil. Do I look like that when I'm being mean?*

*Don't answer that.*

*Jack went on with the story. In the stinking heat of the tavern, the locals had toasted G'Tan's bravery with their local brew, getting themselves shit-faced in the process. That's when the story-telling had started.*

*Angel chipped in. "Apparently, they have a tradition that when someone does something brave, everyone else has to tell a story about themselves, or one of their family, demonstrating how brave they are, too. Most of it was pretty dull, but there was one story that stood out from the rest."*

*She looked over at Jack with an expression of love and affection that set my teeth on edge, then nodded at him to take up the tale.*

*"This one Nabulan told about a time he'd stood on the south eastern sea shore, and watched a flaming rock fall from the sky. At first we thought he was just talking about a meteor shower of some kind, but after a while we realized that whatever he'd seen fall, must have been under power. He described in great detail how it had risen and fallen, all the while heading straight for him, coming in from the north. He said he'd never flinched-which I don't believe for a second. I'm damned sure he put his head between his legs and kissed his ass goodbye-as the flaming rock came directly at him. But at the last minute it surged up into the sky, lifting over his head. He told everyone that he'd watched as the flames shot out over the sea, disappearing below the horizon to the south."*

*I closed my eyes for a moment to visualize a map of the planet. A few hundred clicks south of the inhabited part of Nabula was a large island, roughly the same size and shape as Madagascar on Earth, and in a much more temperate zone of Nabula. The Excalibur's fighters had done some over-flying down there, but hadn't been able to see much through the heavy canopy of trees that covered the place.*

*I pursed my lips as I said, "It's not much to go on. It could have been anything, and whatever it was, it could have just crashed into the sea and been lost."*

*Jack nodded. "I know that. But if there's the slightest chance that it was a ship of some kind, maybe one of the ships belonging to this new race, and it might-just might-have crash-landed on that southern island, then it's worth looking into."*

*My alter-ego paused, then leaned forward. "Because what makes this so interesting is the timing. From what we can make out, this happened around five years ago. Which is just about the time the attacks on ISA shipping started."*

*He had a point.*

*"So what does John think about this? And Ivanova?" I asked. I was sure the Captain of the Excalibur would want to send an investigatory team, but not so sure if Susan would let him.*

*Jack grinned. "What do you think? Ivanova agreed to John sending down a team to investigate. But what's better yet is that they're letting us take the Angel's Rest down to help. Want to come along for the ride?"*

*I've never noticed a tendency in myself to ask really stupid questions, so I guess this is one way in which Jack and I differ. Because the answer to that question is obvious, isn't it?*

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*Sitting in the passenger seat on the bridge of the Angel's Rest next to my wife, my head was spinning. I couldn't make up my mind what to look at. Out of the front viewscreen the planet swung lazily below us, a colorful globe of blue, green and white. Nabula was a beautiful planet from space. It was just when you got down and met the inhabitants that it all started to go wrong.*

*Distracting me from that view was my nervousness when I realized that Jack was letting Angel pilot the ship.*

*Now don't get me wrong. I'm sure Angel is a great pilot. But she has this thing about speed. She likes it way too much. The idea of her bringing the ship into land in the same way as she drove a ground-car was terrifying. And just to make it worse, the image of how she'd looked when Deborah and I had first come aboard the Angel's Rest was still burned into my brain.*

*Although the island we were investigating was much cooler and dryer than the inhabited part of Nabula, it was still warm and Angel had dressed accordingly. Her hair was pulled back off her face, and she wore a small top that was tied tightly across her breasts, pulling them together into a spectacular cleavage, covering them, her arms and her shoulders but little else.*



*Angel was naked from just below her breasts to the top of her very, very low-riding jeans, and the expanse of bare belly and back in between had got me sweating even in the cool of the ship. I dreaded to think what I'd be like once I got down to the planet.*

*My only comfort was that Jack seemed to be suffering equally. I'd seen him taking sideways glances at Deborah's attire, and it seemed to have a similar effect on him as Angel's outfit had on me.*

*Now normally I don't much appreciate other men casting lecherous looks at my wife, but on this occasion, it only seemed fair.*

*Deborah had emerged from the bathroom that morning with her hair straightened, so she could tie it back more easily if she chose. While her top wasn't quite as revealing as Angel's, it hugged her breasts, displayed her cleavage, and left her beautifully flat belly bare above her black jeans.*

*When I'd seen what she was wearing, I'd momentarily considered whether I should again try to dissuade her from accompanying us on the search. I bit my tongue when I remembered the glower I'd received when making the same suggestion after Jack and Angel had left us earlier. My wife may claim not to be as nosy as I am but she hates feeling left out of things, so if Angel was going down to the planet to explore, there was no way Deborah was going to be left behind.*

*So I'd gone back to consoling myself with admiring the view and wondering how in hell is a man supposed to concentrate on his work when the women in his life set out deliberately to distract him.*

*Of course it went both ways.*

*As we'd climbed the stairs to the bridge of the Angel's Rest, with me a couple of steps ahead of Deborah, my lascivious wife had reached up and tweaked my ass. When I looked back at her and grinned, she'd winked at me, whispering, "Your butt looks so damned good in those jeans, you're lucky I don't bite."*

*We've been married nearly fifteen years and we still can't keep our hands off each other.*

*Ain't life grand?*

*Our escort of five Starfuries and two shuttles stayed close as we descended into the atmosphere, flying in over the southern polar region to stay well below any Nabulan sensor arrays. The Excalibur's fighters had been carrying out that maneuver for days, and the Nabulans hadn't said*



*a word, so we assumed they hadn't been detected. We didn't want the natives knowing about our unauthorized expedition.*

*Once we arrived over the island, we split up and started searching, according to a pre-arranged pattern. As our usual sensors were useless, and the canopy of trees prevented a visual inspection, the only tool left to us was an ultrasonic emitter, which bounced high frequency sound waves off the surface. We hoped this might reveal any structures, ships, wrecks or other artifacts that the vegetation might conceal.*

*The only problem was that the emitter only worked at short distances, so Angel had to fly the ship just a couple of hundred meters up, following the contours of the land closely. As the island was formed of hills which occasionally steepened into precipices and mountains, this made the ride interesting.*

*Interesting in the same way as a roller-coaster is interesting.*

*None of us on board the Angel's Rest suffered from motion sickness, but after a couple of hours of searching, G'Tan and No'Kar called up from the belly of the ship, where they were carrying out a visual inspection of the surface, asking if we could hold the ship a little steadier. A quick glance at Deborah showed me she was clenching her jaw tightly and her skin was a lovely shade of pale green.*

*I was just about to ask for a break, when a call came in over the comm. One of the shuttles had found something and was calling for support.*

*I think the sigh of relief we all gave simultaneously could have been heard half way across the island as Angel lifted the ship and turned it abruptly, racing off to the co-ordinates given.*

*As we joined the other shuttles and the Starfuries, all hovering over the spot on the island located by the shuttle flown by Trace Miller, Jack showed the ultrasound signal on the main screen on the Angel's Rest's flight deck. It was difficult to make out, but there was a shape hidden under the trees that looked too regular to be natural. Whoever had spotted it must have had damn good eyes, and it didn't surprise me when Trace came on the comm. and advised us that it was the Excalibur's chief sensor operator, a Minbari called Trevat, who had found the shape.*

*A visual inspection of the site showed little, as the trees covered everything, leaving nowhere for the ships to land. The Starfuries soon took care of that, using their laser weapons to slice through the vegetation. Then they used grapples to lift the debris away from a flat area, and within half an hour had created a clearing big enough for us all to land.*

*I glanced at Angel to see how she was enduring the wait. My sister-in-law isn't exactly renowned for her patience, and with her telekinesis, she could have cleared a landing area much quicker than the Starfuries. That, however, would have made everyone aware of the full extent of her 'talent', something which none of us were prepared for at that stage. Many of the Excalibur's crew knew that the Captain's wife, Lily, had special 'powers', as did her sisters, but we tried to be reasonably discrete as to the extent of those abilities.*

*Angel's teeth were gritted, but she put up with the wait far better than I would have expected. Nevertheless, as soon as there was a space big enough to put the Angel's Rest down, she surged in to land, turning off the ship's engines and dashing out of her seat almost before the landing gear had touched the ground.*

*Jack, Deborah and I were all smiling as we followed at a slightly more sedate pace, knowing that Angel wouldn't get very far on her own. Sure enough, when we arrived in the main cargo bay, G'Tan and No'Kar stood solidly in front of the open bay door, frowning down at Angel, who was hopping from foot to foot with impatience to get out, glaring at the two Narn who blocked her way.*

*Harry stood to one side, holding Baby close to his chest as the little dog barked and wagged his tail with excitement at the prospect of getting out of the ship, into the green area he could see outside the door.*

*Angel could, of course, easily have lifted G'Tan and No'Kar out of her way, but she knew they were only trying to protect her, so she waited impatiently while we got our gear together, and worked out a search plan.*

*John had placed his people under my command, so I gave orders over the comm. link, telling the teams from the shuttles and the Angel's Rest to gather in the clearing, while the Starfuries stayed aloft, giving us air cover.*

*I turned to Harry and said, "You'd better keep Baby on board for a while yet. We don't know what's out there, and I'd hate him to meet up with something that fancied him for lunch."*

*Angel gave a yelp of dismay, and rushed across to take her dog, cuddling him and kissing the top of his head. I thought about suggesting that she and Deborah should stay on board to look after Baby, but I knew it was useless. They'd never agree to be left behind.*

*So I gave a discrete hand signal to G'Tan and No'Kar, knowing that they would guard the sisters with their lives. Once I was sure everyone was armed and ready, we left the ship.*

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*John had sent down a total of ten Marines, along with a pilot and four scientists in each shuttle. I ordered the pilots and one Marine guard for each to stay on board the shuttles and keep them prepped for instant take off.*

*Just in case.*

*Then I split the remaining crew into teams, each team consisting of a pair of scientists and a pair of Marines. Three of these teams went off north, south and west. The last team, Luke Raven, his best biologist--a Vree named Dronsta--and two Minbari warriors, I kept with me, Jack and our wives. The warriors took point as we headed east toward our find, while G'Tan and No'Kar stayed back as rear guard. Jack and I moved to take flank positions without speaking about it. He knew as well as I did what I was doing.*

*This was the best formation I could think of to keep Deborah and Angel safe.*

*Some people think I'm reckless, but I never gamble with my wife and sister-in-law's lives.*

*The look Deborah gave me as we headed away from the Angel's Rest made me aware that she knew what I was up to, and she was--for the moment--willing to play along. That very communicative look also told me that she was quite capable of taking care of herself--Deborah used to train with the Narn Marines when we'd lived aboard the Excalibur, and she was a first class shot as well as an expert with knives--but she wasn't going to argue with me in public. Nevertheless, I knew we were going to have words later about me being over-protective.*

*That's the wonderful thing about having been married for so long. Sometimes we didn't need words to communicate. A look was enough.*

*Our Minbari warriors started hacking their way through the undergrowth, while Luke tracked our progress on a hand-held monitor. We had landed less than a hundred meters from our target, but nevertheless, progress was slow and heavy going.*

*The weather was warm and sunny, with a cool breeze intermittently blowing through the leaves, rustling them into motion. That was the only sound we could hear, apart from the gradually fading noises made by the other teams. After a few meters progress I called a halt, and we stood quietly, listening.*

*The wind had dropped, leaving a silence so complete it was almost unnerving. There was no sound of birds or insects, no movement, nothing.*

*Only the sound of our own breathing disturbed the peace.*

*I turned to Luke and asked softly, "Are you picking up any life signs?"*

*My voice sounded loud against the silence, and everyone turned toward me abruptly, startled by the sudden noise.*

*Luke shook his head. "Nothing. Just plants. As far as this scanner can reach, there are no signs of animal life of any kind. And when we were searching above the tree canopy earlier, I was looking out for birds and insects, but saw nothing. We'll keep looking."*

*I waved us forward again, but this time G'Tan and No'Kar took point, slashing at the jungle with laser rifles, clearing a path toward our goal.*

*The density of the vegetation prevented us from seeing our target until Dronsta literally tripped over it. The small, grey female only just got her hands out in front of her in time to prevent her head-butting a large piece of stone that lay concealed under more flora.*

*Angel and Deborah went to the Vree's rescue, helping her up and dusting her down, while Luke, Jack and I tore away the undergrowth, revealing a square block of stone underneath. I could feel myself grinning with satisfaction when I saw the symbols inscribed in the surface. This was definitely an artifact.*

*I told the Minbari and Narns to stand guard while the rest of us cut away at the foliage, gradually exposing a flat stone surface, deeply inscribed, which led to a low, vertical stone wall,*



*also heavily decorated. This was the stone that Dronsta had nearly cracked her skull on.*

*None of the inscriptions looked familiar, but I hadn't expected them to. These ruins might have been built by a species we'd never come across before. The symbols bore no resemblance to Nabulan writing or numbers, but that meant nothing. There could easily have been an older Nabulan civilization based on this island, which had moved north as the climate cooled.*

*I called the other teams on the comm. links and told them about our find. They had not come across anything of interest, so I called them in, and soon had the whole group working at clearing the area, while the Marines fanned out around us, keeping guard.*

*Given the complete absence of any sign of animal life, I was probably being over-cautious, but I've been caught off-guard before, and lost lives as a result. I wasn't going to lose anyone on this expedition.*

*By the time the light faded, we had cleared an area about fifty meters square. From what we could see, we had discovered a courtyard, surrounded on three sides by low walls, all intricately carved. Some of the carvings depicted beings that looked like nothing I've ever seen before. They certainly looked nothing like the Nabulans. But this still meant nothing. Anyone trying to identify humans based on the carvings from Inca temples would end up with a very peculiar idea of the shape of our species. We could be looking at depictions of deities, which might or might not resemble the species that had carved them.*

*I gritted my teeth as I realized that the person I really needed at my side was Max Eilerson. I cheered up as I remembered I had the next best thing on board one of the White Stars orbiting the planet.*

*As I called a halt for the day and ordered everyone back to the ships, I decided that as soon as I was back on board the Excalibur, I'd call Ivanova and ask if I could borrow Vya for a few days. I was sure the Ranger knew enough of his father's profession to help us with the exploration of the ruins.*

*Then I sighed as I remembered that I would have to go back to my negotiations with the Nabulans the next day, leaving all the fun of exploration to others.*

*Sometimes being an ambassador can really suck.*

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20th May 2284

*At the end of another day of frustration and lack of progress, Deborah and I made our smelly way back to the Excalibur. We went through the daily routine of decontamination, knowing that it wouldn't entirely remove the stench of Nabula's inhabitants from our skin, but looking forward to a soapy scrub later in our quarters.*

*Both of us were willing to postpone that bit of fun, however, wanting to hear how the team investigating the ruins had progressed. As our shuttle back up from the planet had settled in the landing bay, we had seen that the Angel's Rest was already back, so as soon as we left the decontamination units, we went straight across to the ship.*

*Jack and Angel had left the main cargo bay door open, relying on the force fields in place around their ship to keep the atmosphere in. The Excalibur now had the ability to raise these fields in different areas of the landing bay, which meant she didn't have to completely decompress the bay when shuttles came and went, a significant improvement on the arrangements we'd had back in my day as Captain.*

*Deborah and I signaled our arrival as we ascended the ramp, and we were met by a smiling Angel, holding Baby's leash as she greeted us. Looking down fondly at the little dog she said, "I keep him on a leash when we leave the main door open. I don't want him getting out into the landing bay and into trouble."*

*As I leaned in to kiss her cheek--just following my wife's example of course--Angel's nose wrinkled. "You two don't smell so good. Stay near the open door, will you?"*

*I was about to protest when I saw her sly smile and realized she was joking. Well, half-joking. I knew Deborah and I hadn't gotten all of the stink off.*



*We moved into the cargo bay to find a group assembled there, sitting on various chairs and packing cases as they talked. Jack leaned against one of the taller containers that surrounded the central area, looking down on John, Luke, Ivanova and Vya, who sat on chairs, while G'Tan and No'Kar both rested their butts against crates. Dronsta stood by the side of John's chair, her grey head*

*at the same level as his, showing him something on her sensor, which she held with long, delicate grey fingers.*

*Jack nodded toward me and Deborah as we entered, and held his arm out for his wife. Angel immediately moved to his side, putting her free hand around his waist, as he settled his arm across her shoulders. Baby settled at their feet, closed his eyes and was instantly asleep.*

*Jack smiled and waved at a couple of crates near to where G'Tan and No'Kar perched. "Take a seat. You're just in time. We were just about to start briefing Entil'zha Ivanova."*

*I noticed that the crates he indicated were close to the door, and that the air conditioning suddenly came on full force, creating a breeze blowing away from the others. I guessed Angel had used her telekinetic powers to turn the aircon up high. I also guessed that Deborah and I smelled worse than we'd realized.*

*We moved over to the crates, smiling at the others as we went, all too conscious of the twitching of noses that tracked our passage. We definitely had to get to the water shower sooner rather than later.*

*Ivanova nodded her acknowledgement of our arrival, then waved at Vya, who launched into his briefing.*

*"With the help of the crew we took down with us today, we've cleared a large area of the ruins. They're pretty extensive. I don't have anything like my father's expertise in this area, but I saw enough while I was growing up to take a guess at the age of place, which I would put at between one and two thousand years old. We'll need more definitive testing to be sure."*

*Ivanova said nothing, but nodded for Vya to continue. Whatever the young shape-shifter had been up to that day had obviously tired him, as he had kept to his natural form, with golden skin and purple hair like his mother, and the bright blue eyes he'd inherited from his father. These were the only features that never changed, whatever form Vya chose to take.*

*In his Ranger's uniform, Vya looked so mature that it was hard to remember that he was some months younger than my own son. But Vya had aged more quickly than humans, just like his mother, and he was fully adult even though he was a few months short of his fifteenth birthday.*

*I suddenly realized that Vya's mother, Ilas, had been about the same age when she'd given birth to him. Yet, just as Ilas had been a full grown woman at that point in her life, so Vya was a mature adult male at the same age. That maturity showed in the depth of his voice, and the natural authority with which he spoke.*

*"We found an opening which led into what we thought at first was a cave, but it turned out to be a building of some kind. It's dank, dusty and overgrown, but there are carvings there, and they're much clearer than the ones we found outside. Based on what we could see there, I've drawn a few preliminary conclusions."*

*The shape-shifter leaned forward in his seat and counted off on his fingers.*

*"One, whatever civilization lived in this area was not particularly technologically advanced. Probably around the equivalent of the middle ages in Europe on Earth, or the middle Vinatra period on Minbar."*

*I was by no means a specialist in Minbari history but I knew the Vinatra period preceded their advance into technology by several hundred years. We were talking about a civilization that had the wheel, writing, and mechanical armaments, but no power other than that provided by their own strength or that of their domestic animals. Pre-industrial.*

*Vya went on, "Two, this civilization was wiped out around a thousand years ago. I say 'wiped out' because the collapse seems sudden."*

*He paused to let us all ponder on the timing. A thousand years before had been a period of galactic war. It had been the last great struggle between the Vorlons and the Shadows, when the Minbari had helped the Vorlons achieve victory over their enemies. It was a time when many planets had*

*been thrown back into the dark ages by the battles that had raged through the stars. Was the collapse of this civilization a co-incidence of timing, or had it somehow been related to the war that had then been fought so bitterly?*

*When Vya resumed his count, his blue eyes were bright with excitement as he said, "And three, I think the inhabitants may have been in some way related to my species, and that of my mother."*

*A stunned silence followed this pronouncement. We all knew that Max, Ilas and Dureena had been searching the galaxy for fifteen years, trying to find where Ilas had come from. They had so far had no success in their search, but now their son seemed to think he might have succeeded where they had failed. Was this planet truly the source of the species the Vorlons had changed and adapted to become Ilas?*

*Vya leaned forward and looked at Ivanova, his eyes pleading as he begged, "Please, Entil'zha. Let me call my family. We need my father's knowledge and skills on this job. I've only scratched the surface, but he can give you the complete story. Please, let them come."*

*I was surprised that Vya felt the need to beg, but his concern was explained when I glanced at Ivanova and saw her frown.*

*She said softly, "Your father works for IPX, Vya. I don't want that company anywhere near this planet. They'd screw up everything we're trying to do here. You know as well as I do that IPX is only interested in profits, not progress."*

*It sounded as if Ivanova was speaking from personal experience, and I wondered for a moment when her path might have crossed with IPX, with obviously bad results. Yet another mystery in Ivanova's past to which I'd probably never know the answer.*

*I brought my attention back to the present, watching as Vya's face fell, his disappointment evident, but he was obviously too respectful of his Entil'zha to argue. I waited for a moment in the silence that followed, wondering whether anyone else would speak, then a sharp elbow in my side let me know that my wife at least thought it was about time I intervened.*

*I heard words coming out of my mouth that surprised even me. "Susan, I'm not sure you're being entirely fair to Max."*

*Did I really say that? Me? Wanting Max to get the benefit of the doubt? ME?! The person who'd always said Max had iced water running in his veins, and would sell his own grandmother if he could make a decent profit out of it. Where did this sudden urge to defend Max come from? I hadn't spoken to the greedy asshole for several years after he nearly got all of us killed on Cygnus 36. It was really only at Angel's wedding four years earlier that Max and I had started speaking again. Since then, relations had been reasonably amicable, but we still weren't best buddies, and never would be.*

*Deborah's elbow nudged me into continuing. How can such a soft, curvaceous woman have such sharp elbows?*

*I went on, "Vya's parents have been searching for the planet where Ilas and Vya's species originated for years. Even Max Eilerson occasionally puts something before profit." That earned me another jab. "You can trust him on this one. He won't try to turn it into one of IPX's three ring circuses."*

*Ivanova frowned up at me, "What makes you so sure of that? Everything I've ever heard about Eilerson indicates that, just like the rest of IPX, he'd jump at the chance to make money out of his mother's funeral if he could." She gave an apologetic nod at Vya, who flushed at the comment and dropped his head to stare at the floor. Must be tough to grow up knowing that everyone thought your Dad was an avaricious bastard.*

*I grinned down at Ivanova and laughed. That got Vya's attention back up from the floor.*

*"That's easy. If he tried, Dureena would kill him, and then whatever was left when she'd finished with him, Ilas would feed to the dogs. Even Max has the sense to be scared of his wives."*

*And that's how we turned an official mission for the ISA into a family reunion.*

*I must be going soft in my old age.*

*Emotionally soft that is.*

*Deborah makes damn sure I stay physically fighting fit.*

*And she makes sure that a part of me stays very hard indeed.*

*{Chapter 1} {Chapter 2} {Chapter 3}*

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## *The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five A*

*{Part 1: A Marriage of Inconvenience} {Part 2: My Family} {Part 3: Lost in Space}*