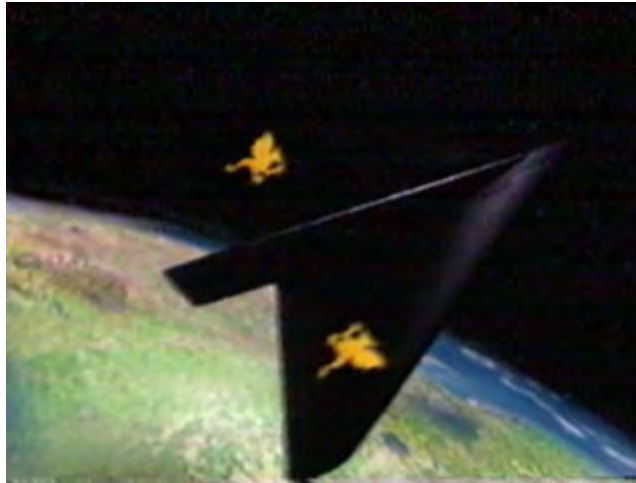


The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Five B - Part 4: Darkness Descends

by *The Space Witches*



Alwyn's ship

Chapter 3

23rd July 2291

John Matheson

We arrived at Sigma 957 on the morning of 19th July 2291 old Earth calendar. You can probably guess that Luke and Lily were with me, both having refused to stay behind on Minbar, despite everything I could tell them about the battle we would be facing. They just told me that they would never let me face that alone, and insisted on boarding with me.

As promised, over one hundred White Stars were waiting for us, with Braknar in command until my arrival. I deployed my fleet around the Excalibur, then we approached the planet slowly, carefully, broadcasting signals of friendship and non-hostility continuously.

The upper atmosphere of the planet was a roiling mass of reds and blues, with occasional masses of white clouds, all of which completely hid the surface below. Our sensors showed that the atmosphere was made up of an unpleasantly thin mix of oxygen and nitrogen with helium, hydrogen, methane and a little sulphur added for flavor. I could almost smell the stench from the Excalibur's bridge. Fortunately, we wouldn't have to go down to the planet's surface on this mission. If we did, we'd have required full atmosphere suits.

We were around 10,000 kilometers away from the edge of the atmosphere when we received the first warning. My Comms operator, a Llort named Jin'stolk, suddenly ripped her earpiece out and threw it to the floor, letting out a wail of pain as she did so. The reason why was soon apparent to everyone on the Bridge as a scream of high-pitched static ripped into our ears, scaling up and down the wavelengths, vibrating internal organs at the lower end of the scale, while almost bursting eardrums at the upper end. At the same time, the viewscreen exploded into a blinding cascade of eye-wateringly bright lights.

For me, what was even worse was that the warning was being broadcast telepathically as well. I felt as if my brain was melting and would ooze out of my ears from the power of the message being sent. It was as much as I could do to yell, "Engines, full reverse, get us out of here!" I was clutching my head, with my hands over my ears and my eyes tight shut, which is not exactly the best position for a ship's commander to take on the bridge.

Somehow my pilot must have heard my command-either that or he used common sense-and backed us up quickly. The noise, lights and telepathic warning all cut off as abruptly as they'd started once we crossed an invisible line that took us outside the exclusion zone. I looked around the bridge and could see that everyone looked pale and shaken. I pulled myself together quickly, and asked Jin'stolk, "Did every ship get the same treatment? And were you able to make any sense out of what was broadcast?" The telepathic message I'd received had been clear in its intent but not in the exact message.

The Llort had picked her earpiece off the floor but still looked at it as if it were some kind of venomous animal that had just bitten her. The light show must have been particularly painful for her, as her species are sensitive to bright lights. With obvious reluctance she replaced her earpiece and started to manipulate the board in front of her, obtaining the information I'd requested from the rest of the fleet.



After a few moments, she turned and said, "Every ship that crossed a threshold of 9,877 kilometers from the outer atmosphere of Sigma 957 received the same signals. None of the ships further back received or was aware of anything, and they have expressed some surprise and concern at the sudden reversal of the Excalibur and the other White Stars affected."

She paused for a moment, listening to a message coming in over her headset, "Braknar says that one of his Rangers on White Star 114 is a linguist who has worked on the original recordings made when Entil'Zha Ivanova approached this planet back in 2260. The linguist has just sent a message providing a translation of the warnings given. They translate

as..."

Jin'stolk paused again and as much as her thickly armored face could, she looked rather embarrassed. "Um, basically the message combines references to sex and travel into an order to leave. Apparently the Walkers of Sigma 957 were well known for their somewhat graphic and explicit expressions, frequently involving references to those parts of the anatomy most often used for reproduction or waste disposal."

I was trying to keep a straight face throughout this explanation, and finally managed to say, "So, could we sum up the message as 'please go away?' do you think?"

Jin'stolk nodded, but added, "I don't think the word 'please' was included, but otherwise, that would be a reasonable translation."

"Well, perhaps we'll just assume the 'please'. I think we can all say that we clearly got the message and we'll back away until there's no risk of them having to repeat themselves."

There are times when 'run away' is definitely the most effective strategy and this was one of those times. The Walkers were long gone, but they'd obviously left mechanisms in place to defend their planet against invaders. Unfortunately, I couldn't see them being very effective against the planet killer that we thought was on its way.

Once we were well clear of the planet, I asked Jin'stolk to send a signal to my fleet, asking the ten senior Shok'na to link into a viewscreen conference, then, leaving Nureel in command, I moved to the conference room at the back of the bridge. Once I was there, images of the ten Shok'na appeared on the viewscreen. I quickly split my fleet into ten groups, asking each Captain to take command of the group assigned to him or her. Then I outlined my plan.

"I want to completely englobe the planet. We'll spread the fleet at equidistant points, ensuring that none of us get too close to the exclusion zone."

While a fleet of over one hundred ships sounds like a lot, I knew we'd be spreading ourselves very thin when trying to surround a planet. Before any of the Captains could raise this issue, I went on, "I want you all scanning the area outwards from your positions for jump points opening. It's essential that we locate those jump points before they're fully established, because as soon as any ship starts to come through, I want the nearest ship to fire directly into the jump point. If we're lucky, we may be able to destroy a few ships before they even arrive in the system."

This was an old Minbari tactic. If you could hit a jump point just right while it was opening, it would collapse as the ship was coming through. As jump points are basically powered by singularities, this is very, very bad for the ship concerned. Bad in the sense of 'imploding until the ship is the size of a molecule' bad. The only problem was that weapons less powerful than the Excalibur's main gun had to hit the jump point exactly right to produce the desired effect.

I continued, "Any jump point hit by the main guns of the Excalibur and the new White Stars will definitely collapse, destroying the ship transiting into normal space. But even those of you without main guns have a chance of collapsing a jump point if you hit it right and with enough firepower. We have no idea how many ships might be accompanying the planet killer, so the more we can take out before they even arrive, the easier any subsequent battle will be. But remember, the White Stars with main guns will be dead in the water for one minute after firing so the other ships nearest them will need to watch their backs in that period."

I could see the nods of agreement from the Shok'Nas visible on the viewscreen. I knew I could rely on them to look after each other if they could. The rest of the conference was taken up with agreeing the exact co-ordinates each ship would assume. Once agreed, we ended the conference, I gave the Excalibur's target position to navigations, we moved into position and then we waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I went off shift, slept badly for six hours then went back to the bridge. Nureel did the same. We kept overlapping and swapping shifts for the next three days. I didn't see Luke once during this period as he was living in Medbay, keeping his staff on high alert for the battle we thought was ahead. Lily made a point of returning to our quarters when I went there to sleep, making sure I ate despite my poor appetite, and helping me relax enough to sleep. The rest of the time she spent with Luke in Medbay, doing whatever she could to help prepare for what lay ahead.

And all this time I carried this knot of anxiety that we were in the wrong place; that the battle would never come. Because if we were wrong, another planet would be destroyed and millions more people could die. I reached the point of not knowing which I dreaded more, being in the wrong place or the right place.

Then they came.

Thirty jump points all opened at once, all around the planet. My fleet started firing and all hell broke loose. Jump points were collapsing, tearing the ships using them apart. In the first five minutes of battle, we managed to destroy seventeen of their ships, all caught in the collapse of their jump points.

White Star 273 got really lucky. This was a new, enhanced ship and a huge jump point opened up right in front of them. The Shok'Na in command waited just long enough to confirm that the planet killer ship was coming through right into her face, then she fired her main gun directly into the jump point, but the jump point was too large to be affected by the blast. They called for help and three other enhanced White Stars converged on their position, arriving just as the planet killer was halfway through the jump point.

By this time 273's main gun had recharged, so all four White Stars fired their main guns together, and this time, they had enough firepower to take the jump point down, collapsing it and destroying the planet killer instantly. It was White Star 273's last act. While they were waiting for their main gun to recharge three Drakh destroyers converged on them and despite everything the other White Stars around them could do, 273 was blown apart.

I yelled instructions at my helm and we hit the Excalibur's very considerably top speed as we moved towards the disabled ships, firing our main gun as we descended into the melee. It took almost everything we had but between the Excalibur and the other White Stars, we managed to hold off the Drakh destroyers, and the other three enhanced ships barely escaped destruction.

After those first, mad five minutes, we still had thirteen Drakh destroyers to fight, each one as big and as heavily armed as the Excalibur. We still had a battle on our hands, but we moved the fleet into separate groups, then took them on. One group of White Stars managed to push their target Drakh destroyer toward Sigma 957 and over the threshold for the planetary warnings, hoping that the broadcasts coming from the planet would distract and confuse the enemy. Instead of a broadcast, a huge beam of destructive energy shot up from the planet and took the destroyer out with one shot. From that moment on the battle turned.

We focused on driving the Drakh towards the planet, making it impossible for them to escape from the cordon of ships we slowly drew tighter and tighter around them. If they tried to break out, either the Excalibur or an enhanced White Star was waiting for them, with the main gun on line. We took out five more destroyers ourselves, and the rest were obliterated by the machines on the planet below.

Even so, we lost seven more White Stars before the last Drakh ship was destroyed, and another four were badly damaged. The battle lasted for nearly three hours but it felt like days. Every ship in my fleet had taken some level of damage, including the Excalibur, and we'd all lost crew.

During the battle the Excalibur's bridge was hit, and several of my people, including Nureel, were injured. The med techs were magnificent. With no thought for their own safety they raced for every injured crewmember, patching them up when possible, evacuating them when not. Luke masterminded the whole operation from Medbay and I have no idea how many of my crew owed their lives to him and his team. I just know that if Luke had stayed behind on Minbar, many more lives would have been lost.

Sometimes the difference between victory and defeat can feel very small and on that day the victory we'd won was paid for in the blood of every species of the ISA. Nearly two hundred Rangers lost their lives, as well as twenty-three of my own crew. Nureel was badly injured but I was enormously relieved when Luke told me that her robust Minbari metabolism would allow her to recover from her injuries much more quickly than a human would. He expected her to be back on the bridge within a few days. I was even more relieved to hear that both Luke and Lily were unhurt; both were working their own type of 'magic' in Medbay, helping and healing in every way they could.

We were repairing the Excalibur's damage and pulling in full casualty reports when Jin'stolk turned to me from her battered but functioning Comms station and said, "We have an incoming message from Sigma 957. They're broadcasting in English, Minbari and every other ISA language simultaneously."

I raised an eyebrow, and said, "Put the English version on speaker please, Jin'stolk."

A voice-deep, calm and somehow infinitely reassuring-spoke, "You have defended this planet at great cost to yourselves. This is appreciated. The machines that now run the automated facilities on this planet will provide you with assistance. Do not be alarmed at the approach of ships from the planet surface. They are sent to help with your repairs."

For a moment, I wondered if this was a trick of some kind. The Walkers of Sigma 957 had never been known for their hospitality; rather the opposite if anything. But some of the damaged White Stars needed extensive repairs before they could survive a trip through hyperspace, and I'd been wracking my brains trying to figure out how we could carry out those repairs without a dockyard facility.

If you ask me now, I honestly couldn't tell you what those ships from Sigma 957 looked like or what they did to my fleet. All I know is that within an hour, every White Star was fully operational, and all the damage done to the Excalibur had been repaired. I know that Technomages say they use advanced technology to give the appearance of magic, but what those machines left behind by the First Ones did on that day was truly magical. If I'd ever doubted just how far in advance of the

current ISA technology those old races were, that day removed all my doubts. We were still children playing in the footprints of the giants who had left our galaxy and gone beyond the rim.

I couldn't help but wonder if they'd needed us at all. Could they have destroyed the Drakh fleet and the planet killer without our assistance and sacrifice? The Great Machine on Epsilon III and the machines on Lorka VII hadn't been able to resist that ship, but perhaps those left behind on Sigma 957 were different? I doubt if we'll ever know the answer to that question, but I have to believe that we made a difference. I only wish the machines left on Sigma 957 could have healed the injured crew of our ships as effectively as they repaired the damage to the ships themselves.

I left the bridge when the repair ships went back down to the planet, heading back to my quarters so I could put together the report I needed to send to Minbar. I knew that every name on the list of the dead would be like a knife in my friend Matthew's heart but I couldn't protect him from that pain, any more than I'd been able to protect my crew and my fleet from the losses we'd sustained.

And once my report was sent off, I would await orders as to where the Entil'Zha wanted my ship and my fleet of White Stars to go next. I had little doubt that it would be into some other firefight. At that moment I completely understood everything Luke had said to me before we'd left Minbar. I understood how tired he was of the fighting, the injuries and the death, and I shared his weariness.

On days like that I wonder why I do this job.

24th July 2291

Connor Black

I sat in my office in the mining compound, tracking the movement of containers from the storage facility next to the spaceport. Each container was marked with a tracking number, and that number was displayed on the data-pad I held. I liked to track those movements myself, to make sure that only those containers agreed were loaded onto the waiting ships. Once they were fully loaded, the gravimetric field surrounding the ship would be held in place until I received confirmation that the appropriate number of credits had been transferred to my accounts.

Not that I don't trust my associates... but I don't trust them as far as I can throw them. And most Raiders tend to come in large economy sizes, just like Jonah Boyle, who was standing on the far side of my office, looking out of the window with binoculars held to his eyes. He was tracking the physical transfer of the containers, just as I was tracking the digital movements. Anyone might think he didn't trust me either. Which he didn't.

But despite our common distrust we'd learned that we could do business together to our mutual advantage. So we traded goods and services and watched each other like hawks.

In the three weeks or so since the Drakh attack-sounds more like a computer game than the deadly affair it'd actually been-the colony had been working on rebuilding. We'd patched, polished and painted the buildings that were repairable and demolished those that weren't. We'd buried our dead-I'd read the eulogy at poor old Vic's memorial-then got on with the business of living, because that's what you do in a small colony like ours.

I'd ended up paying for most of the repairs and for the rebuilding of those homes and businesses that had been destroyed, and my people were duly grateful, but I can assure you that I was handsomely reimbursed for my losses, in accordance with my deal with the Drakh. One thing I have to say about those ugly sons of bitches: they pay their debts promptly. I have no idea where their credits come from, and frankly my dear, I don't give a damn. Once they're in my accounts, they're mine, and that's all I care about.

One part of the deal I'd insisted on was that no Drakh ships touched down at the colony spaceport. My townspeople didn't need to know where the fruits of their labor were going. All they needed to know was that the credits coming back to the colony in exchange were sufficient to buy the goods and services we needed to import, plus of course a little profit for yours truly.



So the ships that landed were all crewed by humans or other familiar species. The Raider community wasn't too choosy about who or what they recruited-as long as they were willing to fight for pay, that was all that mattered. So the ships came from Earth, Narn, Centauri Prime, Brakir, Vreetan, Pak'ma and pretty much every other so-called civilized world except Minbar. I never did see a Minbari Raider ship or a Minbari crewmember.

They came and they loaded up with metals, minerals and foodstuffs, taking them away just about as fast as we could produce them. They even took some of the manufactured goods we were producing and they gave back credits. Lots and lots of credits. All good for a growing colony and for the man who owned and ran it-namely me.

Jonah Boyle had been my main contact with the Raiders for a few years, and he'd come to supervise the transfers in person, making sure that everyone in on the deal stayed honest. Well, as honest as Raiders can be when they're forced into it. Jonah knew me well enough to know that he wouldn't get away with any of the double-dealing tricks he might try elsewhere. He also knew me well enough to make sure I wasn't pulling any dodges on him. We worked well together. Everything was carried out on the basis of a handshake and we both counted our fingers after shaking.

The current ship-a Brakiri transport-finished loading and I looked up at Jonah, calling out, "You can tell your boys to button up now, they're fully loaded." I was sitting with my feet up on my desk, leaning back in my chair, with the data-pad resting on my legs.

Boyle lifted his wrist commlink to his mouth and muttered something inaudible, then waited for a response, which came through a moment later. He turned to me and said, "Looks like everything we ordered is accounted for, so I'll authorize the credit transfer."

He murmured into his commlink again, then pulled a small pad from his pocket and pressed his thumb to it. I knew that the credit transfer needed both his voiceprint and his thumbprint to be released, and if the sensors that picked up both recorded any unusual stress levels, body temperature, blood-pressure and so on, the transaction wouldn't go through. This was Jonah's way of making

sure no one tried to intimidate or torture him into releasing the funds. Cutting his thumb off then playing a voice recording just wouldn't work. He'd made sure I knew that before he came down to my planet. Smart guy.

I brought up my account details on my data-pad and watched as the credit transfer went through, then I also voice activated the release of the gravimetric field, and pressed my thumb to the pad to confirm the release. Two can play at that game.

See? I told you how much we trusted each other.

I stood and strolled over to the window to join Boyle in watching the Brakiri transport lift off. The mine headquarters are positioned on a bluff above the spaceport, giving a clear view of the port, the industrial zone beyond, and the town beyond that. The town itself-we still hadn't come up with a name, although I'd heard recently there was a move to call it Black Harbor (you can figure out why)-was situated inland from a natural bay and harbor, which gave safe haven to a large fishing fleet. A good few of the containers that had just left were filled with canned and frozen fish. From my office up on the bluff I could see everything spread out beneath me and it was a sight that never ceased to satisfy.

As I stood enjoying the view I heard the whistle that signified the changing of shifts in the mine, and I turned to look at the pithead, from which the miners would shortly start to appear. I sensed Boyle moving to stand next to me and realized that he was now looking down at the compound beneath us, watching the steady stream of men moving towards the pithead, preparing to replace the people emerging from the depths.

We watched in silence for a while then Jonah said, "Smooth operation you've got going, Black. How many men do you have working here now?"

"Couple of hundred men and women in each shift. Most of the drilling is done by machine so there's not much work requiring physical strength. Although some of those women are tougher than the men and can hold their liquor better, too."

Most of the miners lived in the barracks I'd had built between the mining compound and the woods, with comfortable quarters and canteen facilities available twenty-five hours a day-that's the length of the rotation of Draxis, in case you wondered. A couple of kilometers away in the woods was the combined bar, whorehouse and gambling den I ran for the benefit of my employees.

I do like to make sure my people are taken care of, especially when I can do so at a decent profit. I made sure that all tastes were provided for, apart from anything involving children or animals. Even I have a line I draw. Anyone with those predilections quickly found themselves having an 'accident' in the mines or somehow wandering over the edge of the cliffs in the darkness. Gravity can be a bitch.

Boyle suddenly lifted his binoculars to his eyes, and I could see him adjusting the controls to zoom in on something in the compound below. "Well, son of a bitch!" He lowered the binoculars and turned to stare at me. "Maybe your operation ain't as smooth as you think, Black."

I narrowed my eyes, asking, "What's got up your butt, Boyle?"

Jonah turned to the window and pointed down, passing me the binoculars, "See that guy with the bushy grey hair? What's he doing here?"

I lifted the viewers and looked where he was pointing. Focusing in on the man he'd pointed out, I said, "He's a new arrival. I haven't met him myself, but my mine boss took him and his partner on a few days ago. He's got experience with the drilling machines while his husband is a cook. Both useful skills around here." I dropped the binoculars and lifted my data-pad, bringing up the details of the new recruit. "The name I have for him is Parker Bowles. His partner is Salvatore Fillioni. Their papers were all good. Do you know him? Is he trouble?"

Boyle laughed. "Parker Bowles? Is that what he's calling himself? I don't know nothing about his husband but I can tell you that his name ain't Parker Bowles. He's called Marcus Cole and he's one of the most senior Rangers on Minbar. Hell, he's married to the woman who used to be boss Ranger!"

I took a deep breath and silently swore to have a severe talk with my mine manager. The kind of talk that would leave bruises, and maybe even scars. But that was for later. For now, I needed to do something about the cuckoo I had in my nest.

"Well, well. So I've got a Ranger spy in my camp, have I? Now that's something I think I can turn to my advantage."

Boyle looked at me as if I'd gone mad. "Are you crazy, Black? Those Rangers are trained killers. If you try to take him, he'll kill every man you send up against him. And if you don't, he'll have some way of sending back information on everything we're doing here back to Minbar. Hell, Black, all bets are off. Our deal is over!"

I shook my head and sighed, "Now calm down, Doyle. Don't get your knickers in a knot." I walked over to a large closet in the corner of my office, and used my palm-print on the lock. It clicked open and I pulled the door wide to show Jonah the contents. "This is my little armory. I keep all sorts of goodies in here. Just in case of a rainy day."

Boyle looked in the closet and his eyebrows rose to meet his hairline. "Hell, Connor, I didn't think you held with guns. I've never seen you wear one."

I laughed. "Just 'cos I don't wear a gun don't mean I don't keep one handy." I selected two rifles from the rack and handed one to Boyle. "These are tranquilizer guns. The darts will knock any man out for at least an hour. If his heart's weak he might not wake up again. Somehow I doubt if a Ranger has a weak heart, don't you?"

Boyle took the gun from me and asked, "You want me to shoot him?"

I nodded. "When I give the word. But first I'm going to call his partner and get him over here. We can take him out and lock him up, then call this Marcus Cole to come in and do the same to him. You up for it?"

Boyle looked doubtful but he obviously didn't want me to see his fear, so he nodded. But before we started I had some other instructions. "Call your ship and get a few of your men to come up here with a couple of stretchers. Once we've got the Ranger unconscious, we can take him and his partner

down to your ship and hold them there. I don't want to get the local sheriff involved in this just yet. He pretty much does what he's told but no need to stretch his conscience too far. We take them out, strap them down, take them down to your ship and lock them up. Get it? Got it? Good."

It worked pretty well, with only a slight hiccup in proceedings. Boyle and I set up in the office downstairs, each kneeling behind empty desks, with the tranq guns trained on the door. Having checked that Fillioni was on duty in the kitchens, I called the head cook, asking him to send the new cook over to my office. I told him there was a query on the bank account details Fillioni had given and we needed him to sort it out for us, or he wouldn't get paid. Five minutes later, there was a knock on the door. I called out, "Come on in."

Boyle was positioned so that as soon as the door opened, Fillioni was in his sights. Boyle fired and took the cook right in the center of his chest but for a moment I didn't think he was going down. Fillioni took a couple of steps forward, his hands raised and his face contorted with rage as he staggered towards Boyle.

I fired and hit him in the chest with a second dart. Then the cook went down hard, his legs just folding beneath him. Having taken a deep breath in sheer relief, we dragged him out of the doorway, then I handcuffed his arms behind his back and used my belt to tie his feet together. Yes, I always carry handcuffs. Old habits die hard and you never know when you might need them-or when you might just get lucky.



We stood over the unconscious man and Boyle gave him a vicious kick in the ribs, saying, "I told you these bastards don't go down easy. Or maybe your darts aren't as strong as you made out?" He turned and looked accusingly at me.

I pushed him away from the body on the floor and said, "Don't damage the goods, Boyle. We may be trading this one later. And my darts are strong enough for one to take any normal man down. I guess these Rangers just ain't normal." In truth, I was appalled at how long Fillioni had stayed on his feet after being hit. He should have gone straight down. But I wasn't going to tell Boyle that.

Jonah's men arrived around then, bringing the stretchers and other equipment we'd asked for, which meant I got my belt and handcuffs back and Fillioni was wrapped up and strapped down to one of the stretchers.

The next call was to the barracks, where I used the same message to get Bowles/Cole to come over to headquarters. While we waited for him to arrive, I made sure that our guns were loaded with a stronger dose of tranquilizer. I didn't want another Ranger coming at me like Fillioni had.

It worked. Five minutes later we had two unconscious Rangers tied up like hogs at a barbeque. By this time the light was failing outside, giving us the perfect cover of darkness to get our loads down to Boyle's ship on the spaceport below.

Marcus Cole

I don't know quite how I end up in the type of situation I found myself in when I woke up. After all, I'm an affable fellow, aren't I? Cheery of disposition, always a friendly word for everyone, always happy to have a chat and pass the time of day. So why is it that I so often seem to wake up and find myself bound hand and foot, and stark naked to boot?

*Now don't get me wrong, there's a time and a place for such things, but the time is preferably one of my own choosing and the place is in the privacy of my own bedroom, with my wife who then proceeds to... Never mind, this isn't really the time to go into that... Actually, if I want to survive my next meeting with my wife there is *never* going to be a time to go into that... Now where was I?*

Oh yes, in what looked like the cargo hold of a spaceship, bound hand and foot with cable ties, stripped naked, with my arms tied behind a metal stanchion that supported the hold ceiling and was very firmly welded to the floor. I had a strong suspicion that someone didn't want me going anywhere.

As I have some experience of waking up in this position (although I have to admit, this was the first time I'd been naked when I'd revived) I've learned not to let on immediately that I'm awake. I opened my eyes the barest crack and fortunately the two men I could see standing in front of me both had their backs turned toward me, as they were looking at another poor fellow who was in a similar position to me on the other side of the cargo bay.

On the positive side, this meant they didn't realize I was awake. On the negative, the other poor bloke was my fellow Ranger and undercover operative, Malcolm Fillion, who appeared to be unconscious.

Something told me that our covers had been blown. You see? I'm quite bright when I try.

The two men were looking down at poor Mal, trussed up like a Sunday chicken, naked as the day he was born. This allowed the men and me to see the fine collection of tattoos Mal had acquired over the years. I've never been a fan of tattoos myself, as I always felt that sticking needles into my skin was something to be avoided if possible, but Mal must have enjoyed the process as he had a fair amount of ink on various parts of his anatomy. The two men seemed to be focusing on one particular piece of artwork on the left side of Mal's chest.

Although he was too far away from me for me to be able to read the word imprinted there, I had seen it before and knew what it said. It was just one short word.

Angel

Mal had carried that tattoo for most of the years I'd known him. It was the name of the woman he'd loved for nearly twenty years, which was nearly as long as I'd loved her myself. But Mal's love was a deep, romantic, sensual passion, borne of a number of brief but ardent encounters with the object of his desire.

My love for the same woman was just as deep, but entirely platonic. Almost brotherly, or perhaps paternal, as I'd always longed to protect her, despite her being very able to protect herself. I owed her my life, but my heart had already been taken by one woman alone: my wife, Susan Ivanova.

Poor Mal's passion had been unrequited for many years since Angel had married her husband, Jack Gideon, the doppelganger of my boss, Matthew Gideon, Entil'Zha of the Anla'Shok. Yes, I know it's all very complicated but do try to keep up.

I watched between narrowed eyes as one of the men bent forward to inspect Mal's tattoo more carefully. It was fortunate that Mal was still unconscious as the man then lifted his booted foot and kicked my colleague in the ribs. Hard. Hard enough for me to be able to hear Mal's ribs crack. I couldn't suppress an outraged cry in response and that drew the attention of the two men back to me. They turned and I almost gasped aloud when I saw their faces. One was unknown to me, but the other...

For a moment, I thought it was Matthew Gideon looming over me, then I noticed the absence of a beard and thought it was Jack Gideon instead. I was about to ask why Jack had me tied in such an undignified position when I looked again more closely and realized that this man looked too young to be Angel's husband.

His hair was brown with tints of auburn, not laced with gray as Jack's hair was. And this man didn't have the lines that marked Jack's face from the suffering he'd endured in the alternative universe from which he'd come. This man's face was unlined and only bore a supercilious sneer, an expression I'd never seen on either Jack's or Matthew's face. And then I knew who this man was and I knew just how much trouble Mal and I were in.

Nearly twenty years before, Angel had asked me to investigate the background of the man who'd come close to ruining her life: Lucas Buck. I'd found various centuries old newspaper articles which had given the history of this man, including one in particular, dictated to a reporter by Buck's alleged son, Caleb Temple. This son had described how Lucas had raped Caleb's mother, murdered his family, then taken the boy for his heir. Caleb had claimed that Buck was possessed by some kind of demon; something he'd called the Rage. I hadn't really believed that part of Caleb Temple's story until I looked up into the eyes of the man standing over me in that cargo hold and saw the demon peering out at me.

I still can't understand how hazel eyes could look that cold, but I couldn't quash the shiver that ran through my body at that moment. I could only try to disguise its source.

"It's really rather chilly in here, you know. Any chance of a blanket? Or even better, perhaps I could have my clothes back? And if you did feel like untying me, that would be very much appreciated, too."

I ran out of words as the men started to laugh. Not at all nice laughter, either. I flicked a glance at the man standing next to Buck and decided he was just a generic thug. Buck was the one in charge here. He was the one I had to watch. But I also thought it might not be healthy to admit immediately that I knew who he was, so I started again, "We haven't been formally introduced, although I must say I don't normally carry out introductions in my birthday suit, but needs must, eh? My name is Parker Bowles, and to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

Buck squatted on his heels to bring his face down to my level and said softly, "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Well, they would be, if you were wearing any. It's never good to start a conversation with a lie. That could lead to serious misunderstandings. And a man in your position really doesn't want to be misunderstood. Do you catch my drift? So let's start again. Your name is Marcus Cole and you're a Ranger and a spy. My name is Connor Black. I own this planet and I'm the man who gets to decide whether you live or die today."

I'm not one of those idiots who never feels fear. I'm often afraid of what's happening around me, of what might happen to me and to my friends and family, but I've learned to control that fear and just get on and do what needs doing. I'd been terribly afraid when I'd stood in front of Neroon and invoked the Denn-shah-the battle to the death-to protect Delemn. I'd been truly terrified when I'd hooked myself up to the alien healing device and given my life force to heal my beloved Susan. I've been afraid many times in my life but looking into those cold hazel eyes made me more fearful than I'd ever been before.

But somehow I found the courage to look that demon right back in the eyes and whisper softly, "Takes one to know one, Lucas Buck." It wasn't the time for pretending I didn't know who I was dealing with.

Buck, or Black as he was then calling himself, smiled. It seemed like a genuine smile of amusement. He lifted himself upright, looked down at me and said, "I've always had a weakness for a man with real guts. Calling me by that name took some spunk, son."

I could see the other man looking puzzled as he hadn't heard what I'd said. He started to speak but Black waved him into silence and went on, "Let me tell you what's gonna happen now, Marcus Cole, Ranger and spy, and let's see if we can reach an amicable accommodation."

I listened attentively as he went on, "I'm going to ask you some questions. I know the answers to some of them, so I'll know if you try to lie. And if you do..." He waved the thug over to stand next to Mal Fillion, who was still blissfully unconscious and unaware of our predicament. "If you do, my friend here will take a piece out of your friend's hide."

I looked across and the thug was now holding a large knife. He grinned across at us as he lowered it until it lay alongside the side of Mal's head. He didn't have to spell out the threat.

Buck went on, "I know Rangers are tough, so it's pointless threatening you, but I also know you're supposed to be honorable, so you won't want to see your colleague over there carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey. But just in case he's not someone you care about, let me tell you what's going to happen later. We have a telepath on his way here; one of the old Psi Cops who went rogue when the Psi Corps was disbanded. When he gets here, he's going to turn your brain inside out, so we'll find out whatever we want anyway. But if you play ball with us now, maybe you and your friend will get out of this with your brains undamaged and your skins intact. I suspect your wife might prefer to get you back alive and well. Or we can send you to her in bits. Whichever works for you."

My mouth had gone dry as he spoke, but I managed to croak out, "Ask your questions. I won't lie but I won't promise to give you all the answers you want." It was entirely possible he was lying about the telepath, but I really didn't want to see poor Mal cut about, and I was sure he meant that

threat. I wasn't about to betray any secrets, but I decided I might possibly talk my way out of this yet.

Buck nodded. "Fair enough." He squatted next to me again and spoke softly, so that the thug over by Fillion couldn't hear him. "You can start by telling me why your friend has that word tattooed on his chest."

This was going to be tricky. How to explain without making him want to kill Mal. "It's the name of someone very special to him. And to me. And I suspect, also to you." I spoke as softly as Buck had.

The hazel eyes narrowed. "In what way, 'special'?"

"Angel, or Angelique Gideon, formerly Denier, saved my life nearly twenty years ago. That makes her very special in my view." I went on to explain how Angel and her sisters had brought me back from the cryogenic 'death' I'd undergone after giving my life force to Susan. "Saving me was Angel's idea, so I owe her everything."



Buck smiled, and this time the smile reached his eyes, "She always was a hopeless romantic." He then laughed and said, "When Angel and I lived on B5, we heard the story about you using that alien healing device to save the love of your life. She thought it was romantic. I thought it sounded like a damned useful piece of equipment to have around. So I made a point of acquiring it, and a few years later, I used it to save Angel's life when she was poisoned back on Earth. So in a way, she saved your life, but you also helped save her."

He laughed again, but then his eyes narrowed and lost their warmth. "So what did she do for your friend that merits the tattoo?"

Listening to his story about saving Angel had given me the time to think about how to phrase my response. "He helped her when she was lonely and sad. He then had the misfortune to fall in love with her, but she didn't love him the same way. At that time she was still in love with one man. And you know very well who that man was. She stayed in love with him until he kidnapped her, seduced her, impregnated her, then drove her away when she was still weak and sick from childbirth, forcing her to leave her son behind."

I was taking a huge risk but I wanted him focused on me and on Angel's past, not on Mal Fillion.

Buck surged to his feet and glared down at me. He took a deep breath, shook his head slowly, closed his eyes, then said evenly, "She chose to leave. I wanted her to stay. I knew she was weak and sick, but I'd promised I'd let her go if she made that choice. I'm a man of my word, Ranger. I kept my promise. I let her go and I let her alone. Even after she married that clown from another universe, I stayed away."

I looked up at him and found that I almost pitied him. It was obvious to me that he still loved Angel, but that he could never admit it, not even to himself. I spoke softly, so he lowered himself back to my side to catch my words. "I know. And it does you credit. She's happy now, and for anyone who loves Angel, that should be enough."

Buck shook his head, closing his eyes again and pushing his pain down deep inside himself. When he opened his eyes again, the demon was back, staring out at me, as cold as the ninth circle of hell.

"Tell me about the other sisters. Where are they and what are they doing?" It seemed an odd request but I saw no reason not to answer.

"Demon is with her husband on Minbar and Lily is with her partners on the Excalibur."

Buck nodded, "And the other one? The shape shifter? Where is she now?"

I couldn't hide my surprise at this question. "You don't know? I would have thought you'd have kept track of them all." I saw his eyes narrow again and rushed on before he could tell the thug to start hurting Mal. "She's dead. She died seven years ago, fighting a Vorlon."

That took him by surprise. "Dead? Well, well, well. Now that's an interesting piece of news, Ranger. Those sisters won't be able to form the merge without the shape shifter and that means they won't be quite so powerful any more. I doubt if three of them could put me back into an Apocalypse Box, like the four of them did. Although Angel has come a long way since..." He trailed off, seemingly lost in memories for a moment. Then he looked at me closely again and said, "So who sent you here and why?"

What followed was a more standard interrogation, and I was happy to provide accurate answers to most of his questions. I explained how we'd focused on this planet, an explanation that left him cursing the stupidity of the Raiders and the Drakh for making their path so obvious. I told him about the search for the invaders from the other universe, and for the planet killer ship that the Drakh seemed to have found. The only thing I lied about was how I had arrived on Draxis. I told him that the Drazi traders who had brought us had no idea who we really were, and that they'd picked us up on Zhabar, thinking Mal and I were the married couple we had purported to be. He seemed to accept this.

What he wouldn't accept was that we had no way to contact Minbar and our base before we left. I tried to explain, "Once we had the information we needed, our plan was to steal a ship from the port here and make our way back to Minbar as fast as possible, sending any message we needed to get through on ahead." But he wasn't really buying it. He turned and waved at the thug, and before I could protest, poor Mal's ear had been cut off.

I yelled a protest, screaming, "I'm telling you the truth! It doesn't matter how many bits of him you cut off, I can't change my story because it's true! Between us, he and I can break into and steal pretty much any ship in the ISA. That's what we're trained to do; we can get in and out of anywhere." That much was true.

Buck waved the thug away from Mal, and I sighed in relief. I was glad my friend was still unconscious, but I was getting worried about how long he was taking to wake up. I looked up at Buck and asked, "What have you done to him to keep him unconscious for so long?" I could see Mal was breathing, and blood was pouring from the wound on the side of his head, so I knew he was still alive at least.

"Took two darts to stop him. He got a double dose of tranquilizer, which is probably no bad thing right now." He turned and walked away from me, calling to his colleague to join him out of my earshot. They had a brief conversation, then Buck returned to my side.

"Here's what's going to happen next. Boyle is getting your clothes. I'm going to cut your ties and release you and then you can get dressed. If you try anything, Boyle will cut your friend's throat. You won't be able to move fast enough to stop him. Once you're dressed, I'm going to handcuff your hands behind your back and then you're going to come with me, nice and quiet, down to the colony jail. As far as the sheriff is concerned you've been caught stealing from the mine, and we're holding you until we can have a trial. To make sure you behave yourself, Fillioni stays here. Once you're tucked up in a nice cell, I'll call Boyle, and he'll make sure your friend gets medical attention for his wound. But he'll stay here as a guarantee of your good behavior. Is that all clear? If you try to tell anyone who you are, or escape, or attack me or anyone else on this planet, your friend dies. Slowly and painfully. Got it?"

I nodded, but as always, I had to ask more questions, "Why are you holding us? I would have thought..." Discretion finally caught up with my mouth and I refrained from ending the sentence as I had planned, which was, "you'd be better off killing us."

Buck smiled again, a cold and calculating sneer. "What use would you be to me dead, Ranger? There's a war coming sometime soon, and I know who I think is going to win, but if I'm wrong, it won't hurt to have a couple of chips to bargain with."

There was little I could do except co-operate. I noticed there was no further mention of a telepathic interrogation, so at least I could relax about keeping Droshan's involvement in our scheme a secret. Now I just had to plan a jailbreak, contact Droshan with the little information I had, and rescue Mal. That would take a little thought, but I had lots of thinking time once I was bundled into the cell at the sheriff's station. In fact, I had little else other than thinking time, as I never saw Buck or his colleague again.

25th July 2291

Matthew Gideon

I looked down the dinner table and smiled at my wife, enjoying a quiet family evening at home for once. Things had been pretty quiet since I'd received the news from Sigma 957 that the fleet I'd sent there had won their battle and destroyed the planet killer. It was a huge relief to know that ship was taken out of the picture, although the extent of the losses we'd suffered in the battle had sickened me. Nearly two hundred Rangers dead and many wounded, some so seriously they would never fully recover. Nearly two hundred more letters to write to families and partners, explaining why they would never see their loved ones again.

I was also concerned that in the four days since getting an initial report from Marcus Cole and Mal Fillion confirming that they'd arrived on Draxis, we'd received no further updates. I'd discussed the issue with Trulann earlier in the day, and we'd agreed that we'd wait two more days before sending in another team to investigate.

But in the meantime, a welcome break from the general gloom had arrived in the form of my daughter, Mattie. Her ship had landed that afternoon, having been escorted from Earth by one of my White Stars. I'd contacted the ship's Captain before they'd left Earth and explained the reason for the escort. And yes, I know nepotism is wrong, but this is my daughter, OK?

Captain Holmes had been delighted to hear that her ship was under Ranger protection, at least for the voyage to Minbar. She'd heard of the losses of shipping in recent months and although no passenger liners had been among the missing ships so far, Captain Holmes didn't want her ship to be the first. So Mattie had arrived safely that afternoon and she'd rushed into the house like a whirlwind of energy and enthusiasm, accompanied by a new friend.

My daughter had called me from the liner a day earlier and asked if she could bring this new friend, whom she'd met on board ship, to stay for a couple of days. "Her name is Sali. She's taking a year off before she starts college to intern at the ISA and she says you know one of her mothers." Mattie's face had grinned out of the screen in my office, where I'd taken a welcome break from dictating letters to take her call.

I'd raised an eyebrow and leaned back in my chair, lifting my feet onto the desk. "What's Sali's last name then? And what's her mother's name?"

Mattie grinned, "She hates her full name; that's why she's shortened it. She was born Sandra Elizabeth Lochley-Perkins. What a mouthfull! And her mother is..."

I'd bolted upright in my chair and leaned forward to interrupt. "Her mother's name is Elizabeth Lochley, right?"

"So you do know her! That's wonderful, Daddy. So will it be OK if Sali comes to stay for a few days? Just until she can get her accommodation at the ISA sorted out? It would be much nicer for her than staying at the hotel she has booked."

I reassured Mattie that we would love to have her friend come to stay, all the time wondering how much Sali might know about my relationship with her mother. As I finished my call, I couldn't help thinking back on the period of my life when I'd 'known' Liz...I beg her pardon...Elizabeth Lochley very well indeed. Intimately. Even biblically.

Liz and I had enjoyed a steamy-and I mean that literally as we'd spent a lot of time in the real water shower in her quarters on Babylon 5-relationship for a few months back in 2267, before I'd met Deborah. It was a relationship mainly built on a strong physical attraction, as we were pretty incompatible in other ways. She was too 'by the book' for my taste, and she thought I was too much of a maverick. Lochley had stayed loyal to President Clark in the Earth civil war thirty years ago, while I'd been on the side of Sheridan and the rebels. But none of that had prevented us from having a lot of soapy fun whenever our paths had crossed.

After my marriage we'd been unable to transition from lovers to friends, and I'd neither seen nor heard much of Lochley during the past twenty years other than a brief encounter back in February '73. She'd told me then of her marriage to Sandra Perkins and that Sandra was pregnant. Since then, I'd heard just brief mentions of Liz's progress through Earthforce until she'd finally retired in

2287 at the age of seventy, with the rank of Admiral. As far as I knew, she was now living on Earth with her wife.

I turned to my computer and did a little research, finding that Lochley was indeed a resident of Earth, living in the Chicago Metropolis with her wife, Sandra and their only child, Sandra Elizabeth etc etc. Sandra Elizabeth-Sali to her friends-had been born in July 2273.

That surprised me on two counts. First, it meant that when Lochley had told me about her wife's pregnancy back in February of that year, Sandra must have been much further along than Liz had indicated at the time. The second surprise came from doing my sums and working out that Sali was only just eighteen, and therefore only a few months older than my own daughter. That was very young to be accepted as an intern to the ISA and I wondered how many strings her mother had pulled to get her that assignment.

A little more research showed that young Sali was quite an exceptional scholar, with a handful of graduate level credits already on her resume. Maybe Liz hadn't needed to pull strings after all.

Having decided we probably had an interesting few days ahead of us, I'd called my wife to let her know about our houseguest and went back to work.

Mattie and Sali had arrived late in the afternoon, and had only had just enough time to unpack their things before we sat down to a family dinner. Just for once, we had no guests at the dinner table. Jack and Angel had been invited to join Ivanova and Talia, so it was just us and our nanny, Benedikte, sitting at our long dinner table that evening. This gave me my first opportunity to see how Liz Lochley's daughter had turned out. Physically at least, she had turned out very well indeed.



Taller than Liz, she shared Lochley's physical shape: long legs, narrow hips, broad shoulders and full breasts. She'd also inherited Liz's striking large eyes, but brown rather than her mother's emerald green. Sali's hair was thick and dark, worn loose around her shoulders; altogether a very attractive young lady.

She sat between Mattie and Deborah, eating enthusiastically, but only speaking to express her appreciation of the meal and our hospitality. Her manners seemed as good as her appearance. Given her academic qualifications, I could see that Sali Lochley-Perkins would one day be a woman to be reckoned with, just like her mother.

Looking at my daughter, I could see that Mattie was utterly entranced and besotted with her new friend. And when the two of them made eye contact, I could see that the attraction was mutual. They made a striking couple sitting next to each other, Mattie's short, blonde curls contrasting with Sali's long, dark waves of hair. The two girls were about the same height, but my daughter's build was more slender.

Mattie has been a skinny kid all her life, not from lack of eating-she could always graze her way through the entire contents of any refrigerator in her path-but from her incredible physical energy, which keeps her racing at everything she does at top speed. Trying to slow Mattie down is like trying to stop a tornado: futile and dangerous.

Puberty had made little difference to the shape of Mattie's body, and she remains slim hiped and small breasted. In the last year she's gained some muscle bulk, as she's been working out with weights to build her body strength in preparation for joining Earthforce. Her face is very similar to her mother's, with large hazel eyes, a long straight nose and full lips, but her chin is stronger and more determined than Deborah's. Mattie has been fighting ever since she was taken prematurely from her mother's womb, and her combative nature shows in her expression.

Well, it usually does. Just then Mattie's expression was more lustful than pugnacious. Her throat was flushed, her lips swollen and her pupils dilated. I could see that Sali was in a similar state of sexual tension and couldn't help smiling to myself. I somehow doubted they'd be staying in their own rooms that night.

I'd been aware of my daughter's sexual preferences since I'd accidentally interrupted her in flagrante the previous summer. I'd walked into our living room to find her straddling one of my male Ranger trainees, both of them naked with their clothes strewn around the room. I'd paused just long enough for Mattie to note my presence, then quietly withdrawn to my office.

Mattie had knocked on my study door a little later and came to sit opposite me, saying "Sorry, Daddy."

We'd then had a long talk about sex, men, women, our personal preferences and the best way to deal with the urges that most young people of her age felt. Mattie knew I disapproved of her session with my Ranger trainee, not so much because of the sex and the location, but because she'd just been using the young man to see if she might prefer men to women. She promised me that any future liaisons would be carried out in the privacy of her own room and that she'd have more consideration for her future sexual partners' feelings, so we left it at that.

I wasn't bothered by Mattie's preference for women-hell, I prefer women myself, so who am I to criticize?-and at least it meant that pregnancy was an unlikely outcome of her sexual experimentation. I already had one unexpected grandchild and much as I love little Jean-Luc, I really didn't need another baby around the house.

I looked down the length of the dinner table and caught my wife's eye just in time to see her smile and wink at me. She had no doubt sensed the emotions between the two girls and was as amused as I was by the young lust on display. A quick look at my son, who shares his mother's empathic abilities, showed that he was watching the two girls with similar amusement.

Marcus didn't really have caused to gloat, as I could see that his hand was resting on our nanny's knee under the table, as she sat next to him. It looked like Ben and Marcus were going to be rocking the rafters themselves soon enough. And not to be left out, I had plans for doing things with my wife that would astonish the younger generation if they knew what we were up to.

Which just goes to show what a lousy prophet I am.

The kids had just got up to start clearing the table when my commlink sounded. Everyone paused as I lifted the link to my mouth and said, "Gideon, go." We all knew it must be something urgent for a family dinner to be interrupted.

Trulann's voice sounded loud in the silence of the dining room. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, Entil'Zha, but we have just received some news that I think you should know immediately. Emperor Vir Cotto is dead."

I heard Deborah gasp and looked up as I felt a wave of her distress ripple through me. Then she got herself under control, but her hand was held to her mouth and I could see her eyes were filled with tears. Marcus and Mattie moved quickly to stand by their mother's side, while Ben and Sali both looked shocked.

I kept my voice under tight control as I spoke. "When and how?"

Trulann advised that Vir had been assassinated by one of his imperial guards less than an hour before. "The guard was killed instantly by his colleagues, and they examined him quickly enough to see the disintegrating form of a Drakh Keeper attached to his neck. It seems that the empath responsible for the Emperor's security had been taken ill yesterday, nothing serious but enough to confine her to her quarters for a short period. That illness is now being investigated of course."

I nodded. Every senior figure in the ISA was guarded by telepaths and empaths, the latter specifically for the purpose of identifying people under the control of Drakh Keepers. Only empaths could sense their presence. It appeared that Vir's empath had been taken out of commission specifically to allow one of the Imperial Guard to be taken over. I asked, "Does Delenn know about this yet?"



I knew that President Delenn would be deeply distressed at Vir's death. Hell, I was distressed myself. I'd liked the slightly bumbling, kind and deeply dedicated Centauri. He'd saved my life and Deborah's many years before when we'd been taken prisoner on Centauri Prime. But Delenn had known him much longer than we had and Vir had also saved her life and that of John Sheridan when the Drakh had kidnapped their son.

Trulann said, "I will call the President immediately, if that is all?"

I replied, "Please do, but ask Delenn if she can call me as soon as she has a moment. We'll need to discuss the implications of this for the security of the ISA. Has Dius Vintari been confirmed as the new Emperor as yet?"

Dius Vintari was the son of a previous Centuari Emperor, Cartagia. Don't ask me why Dius hadn't become Emperor on the death of his father; Centauri politics are beyond me. But Vir had nominated Dius as his heir to the throne, which should have been good news for the ISA, as Dius had spent a few years as a teenager living with Delenn and Sheridan and he remained a close friend of Delenn's.

Trulann nodded, "Yes, Emperor Vintari's ascension to the throne has been confirmed."

I ended the call to let Trulann contact Delenn and turned to my family. Deborah had pulled herself together but I could see how upset she still was. Marcus and Mattie both looked unhappy, as they'd

met and liked Vir when he'd visited us on several occasions over the years.

I smiled sadly at them and said, "Your mother and I are going to need to spend some time working out what needs to be done about this sad news. Could I ask the four of you to clear up in here and the kitchen? If there's any more news we'll let you know, but otherwise, we'll see you all in the morning."

I walked to Deborah's side and held out my hand to her. She stood and gripped my hand firmly, trying to smile through her tears. We walked to my office to face the consequences of the news we'd just received. It was a long night, and we never did get to do the things I'd planned earlier that evening, but we found comfort in each other's company. I suspect the younger generation found their comfort in rather more strenuous activities.

26th July 2291

Alwyn

I sat in the control room of my ship pondering the events of the previous few weeks and considering my plans for the next few days. I call it 'pondering' but Sarah insisted that I was brooding, and to my deep disgust, Ishtar agreed with her. It's a sad day when a Mage's dragon and wife unite against him. Another thing to ponder on.

My control room is my favorite place in the galaxy, and a good place to ponder. It appears to be the epitome of an English gentleman's library, with leather chairs, a large fireplace, book-lined walls and no apparent technology. But like all things created by Technomages, appearances deceived. The room was actually a sophisticated control center for my ship and all external communications. There were few places in the galaxy I could not view from that room. Two of those few places were the bedrooms where my wife and son currently rested. They both value their privacy.

I had collected Sarah and Jaysen on my way between the Technomage hiding place and Minbar. It was good to be together as a family again, although I would rather have left them hidden if I could. But I had become uncertain that my enemies among the Mages remained in ignorance of my family's location and had come to the reluctant conclusion that Sarah and Jaysen would be safer with me than on their own. So the three of us now travelled together towards Minbar, along with two others of my order who did not control their own ships.

I was leading a fleet of seventeen Technomage ships, carrying the thirty-nine Mages I had managed to convince to join the side of light. That was more than I had expected or hoped, and it meant that forty of us would be available to help the Rangers and the ISA in the battle ahead. Sadly, most of those accompanying me were not trained in the art of combat.

The majority of the Warrior Technomages had joined the forces of darkness and were on their way to join the Drakh and Invader fleet. Of the forty Mages currently travelling towards Minbar, over half were Healers and most of the rest were Seekers, who were dedicated to finding new knowledge and technology for our order. Only two of group I led were trained as Warriors. Even so, the knowledge the Healers and Seekers possessed would be useful and I wanted them with me, rather than exposed to the dangers that the other Warrior Mages could represent.

The Mages in my small fleet were accompanied by their families, leaving the Mage hiding place deserted for the first time since the original Technomage fleet had arrived there in 2259. In the intervening years, Mages had died, but had also partnered and procreated, so the numbers of inhabitants of the hiding place had increased over the years. None of the new generation had been able to transition into full Magehood, as the technology to perform that transformation had been taken with the Shadows when they left the galaxy.

The main subject of my pondering-not brooding, I don't brood-was the future of those families after our arrival on Minbar. I knew that many of my fellows would be reluctant to leave their families behind when we joined the ISA fleet in the battle ahead, but I also knew that those families would be much safer on Minbar, if the Minbari were willing to take them in.

I also knew that some of the Mages who accompanied me would not relish the prospect of joining the combatants in the war that now awaited us, but somehow I had to convince them. The Healers amongst them could be of great benefit in the fight ahead, and the Seekers could also play a vital role. I needed every Mage I could muster at my side.

My brooding-pondering-was broken by the sound of a soft chime from my ship and a mellow feminine voice.

"We are approaching the beacon for Minbar, and you asked me to alert you to our arrival. Please provide instructions."

I nodded and said, "Thank you. Hold us at the beacon and instruct the rest of the fleet to hold here. Then connect me to Entil'Zha Gideon, please." I have always believed in being polite to my ship. She has too many ways of making my life difficult if I annoy her.

I wasn't looking forward to my conversation with Matthew Gideon. I knew he would be indignant at the length of my absence, and I really had no idea how he would react to the prospect of taking in the nearly one hundred refugees who made up the Technomage families.

His mood would not be improved when I delivered the news I had for him. He was facing a battle which he had to win. If he lost, then everything he had ever fought for, everything in which he believed, would be annihilated. I could hardly blame him for reacting badly to that news.

I sighed and waited for my connection to the Entil'Zha's office to go through, thinking about the time I had known Matthew Gideon and his wife. Over the twenty-two years that had passed since we had first met I had been continuously manipulating and maneuvering them both, until they were in the positions I wished for them, ready to take the actions I needed them to take. Some of my actions were known to them, but many were not.

Only Sarah knew how I had worked behind the scenes, using Galen's influence with President Sheridan to get his agreement to Matthew taking his family and that of John Matheson aboard the Excalibur after the discovery of the cure to the Drakh plague. Only Sarah knew how I had later worked to get Gideon appointed as President Sheridan's roving trouble-shooter after the Captain's retirement from Earthforce.

And only Sarah knew how I had contrived events to ensure that Matthew would become Entil'Zha when Ivanova stood down. I had not been involved in the recovery of Marcus Cole which had led to Ivanova's resignation, but my plans had been in place to ensure the same outcome at around that time. Sometimes fate acts in the ways we want, although I have to admit that for the most part I have acted to ensure that chance works to my direction.

Gideon might understand why I had loaded the dice to achieve my desired outcomes, but he would not be pleased if he ever found out how I had influenced events to ensure that he and his family were in the right place, in the right roles at the right time.

And that time was now upon us.

I sometimes-when I am pondering, you understand-wondered what right I had to change the lives of so many people to suit my plans. And I wondered how their lives would have turned out had I not intervened.

Would Matthew and Demon be living a quiet retired life on Earth? Where would John Matheson and his family be? And Angel? What would have happened to Angel had I not helped her develop her powers and her ability to control them? Would she be happier if she remained ignorant of her destiny? Could she have lived a quiet life, using her telekinesis judiciously and carefully, hiding her skills? I had to smile at that image. Angel, living a quiet life? That could never have happened.

Overall, perhaps the influence I have asserted over the Witches and their families might have benefited them all. We would never know otherwise. None of us can ever know what might have been. But I still preferred that my secret actions remained a secret, known only to Sarah and myself.

I could trust Sarah with any secret. I could trust Sarah with my life and the lives of everyone I knew and loved. I could and I did.

Another soft chime alerted me to the fact that my call to Gideon had gone through. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for his reactions to the news that I carried. His image filled the air in front of my chair and I spoke in my most pompous tone.

"Greetings, Entil'Zha Gideon. I have important news for you and your wife. It is imperative that she joins you immediately and that you act promptly on the information I have to impart."

As I expected, this produced a snarl from Matthew.

*"Where the fuck have you been for the last two months, Alwyn? We've been waiting for word from you on what the Technomages are up to and what progress you've made in replacing Ilas in the merge. The way things are going to hell in a handcart around here, we may need you *and* the merge in the near future!"*

This was the reaction I had hoped to provoke. It's always easier to deal with Matthew when he's angry. If he stopped to think too much, he might see through some of my obfuscations.

"Calm yourself, Matthew. I will explain everything when Demon joins us."

I watched Gideon scowl and then he flung himself out of his chair and out of the room, obviously intending to have a discussion with his wife out of my hearing before she joined us. That didn't matter of course. Demon was always the more rational of the couple, and she would listen carefully to what I had to say and advise. That was providing I didn't advise anything that would put her family in danger. Which was exactly what I was about to do.

When the couple returned, Demon nodded at the viewscreen and gave me a half-smile before settling on a sofa, pulling Matthew down next to her. She said quietly, "It's good to see you, Alwyn. We were becoming concerned about you. How are Sarah and Jaysen? Are they with you?"

I smiled back and said, "Yes, and we are currently in hyperspace, waiting at the Minbari beacon. If you agree to my proposals, we can be with you today."

That widened the smile on Demon's face, but Matthew was still scowling.

"I'll listen to your proposals, but first, are you up to date with what's been happening in the ISA? Do you know we've destroyed the planet killer? And have you heard about the death of Emperor Vir Cotto?"



I nodded. "It is sad news about Vir Cotto, and the timing is suspicious to say the least. In regard to the planet killer, I never expected less of you, Matthew. I had every confidence in your ability to deal with that threat. That is why I turned my attention to the threat I knew you could not handle. The remaining Mages."

I went on to tell them how the Mages had split and how I had brought those who had joined me, along with their families, to Minbar.

"We need a place for the families to stay when we go into battle. Can you provide that, Matthew?"

Gideon frowned. "It's not my call, Alwyn. I'll need to pass that decision to Delenn, but to be honest, I doubt if there will be a problem. Let me get a message to her now, then we can carry on talking. Send me details of the number of people and ships you want to bring here."

I sent all the details Gideon requested and waited while he contacted his XO and asked him to deal with the issue. Matthew then turned his attention back to me.

"So, tell me what battle are you planning to get into, and who do you mean by 'we'?"

"The battle will be with the Drakh and Invader fleets, which are combining forces with the Dark Mages. They are gathering at Coriana VI. Once they have their forces combined, they plan to attack every planet of the ISA, starting with Minbar, then moving onto Earth and the home planets of every other ISA member. They may not have the planet killer ship any more, but they can still damage each planet so severely that it will not recover to continue fighting against them. You will have one chance to stop them, one opportunity to destroy the threat before it destroys you. You must meet them at Coriana VI with every ship at your disposal. You must fight the enemy there and you must win!"

Matthew Gideon

I really hate it when someone tells me I 'must' do something. It makes me dig my heels in like a mule and refuse just on principle. As Alwyn spoke, I could feel myself putting my head down and digging in when a wave of calmness washed over me, pacifying my bad temper. My wife was doing her best to defuse the situation as only she could. But I was still chewing the inside of my lip as I responded, "Must? I don't see any 'must' about it, Alwyn. There have to be other ways of dealing with this threat other than a head-on confrontation."

I had been deep in dealing with the kind of bureaucratic form filling that I hate when Alwyn's call had come through. That hadn't put me in the mood to deal with the Technomage's pomposity and verbosity. It hadn't helped that neither Deborah nor I had got much sleep the night before.

By the time we'd spoken with everyone who needed to know the news about Emperor Vir Cotto, the sun had been showing as a glimmer in the eastern sky. We'd snatched a couple of hours sleep before getting back to work, dealing with the flood of frightened enquiries that had come in from all over the ISA during the night.

There was a king on Earth in the 18th century who is supposed to have said, "Après moi le deluge". Well, Vir Cotto could have said the same. His death had caused a tsunami of apprehension and fear that was engulfing the ISA. I knew that my office was only getting the overflow and that Delenn's people must be drowning, but that wasn't much consolation.

So being short on sleep, short of temper and very much deprived of my usual morning exercise with my wife-thoroughly satisfying sex is my preferred way to start the day-I wasn't in the best frame of mind to be ordered about by an arrogant Technomage.

Deborah squeezed my hand gently, sending another wave of calm. She knows that Alwyn can get up my nose quicker than a wasp when I was going flat out on my motorbike. And I don't enjoy that sensation one little bit. You should see what the Minbari version of a wasp looks like!

I watched Alwyn's image on the viewscreen in my study and waited for the explosion. Much to my surprise it didn't happen. Instead, Alwyn sighed gently and looked sad.

"I wish there were an alternative, Matthew. I wish so many people did not have to die to end this threat to the galaxy. But this really is our only chance. Never again will the forces of darkness be gathered in one place, giving us this opportunity to destroy them completely. It will be hard and it will be costly, but it can be done if we combine the White Star fleet with every ship the ISA members can spare, and when it is done, the galaxy will be at peace, safe from outside threats for centuries."

I noticed Alwyn's use of the modifier 'outside'. Threats could also come from within, but that was an issue for another time. At the moment we had quite enough external dangers to deal with.

The Mage continued, "The combined home fleets of the ISA and the Rangers outnumber the enemy at this time, but will not do so for much longer. If we fight them now, with the power of the Witches' merge fighting alongside us, we can win. If we don't come together now, if we delay and allow them to accumulate more ships, and if we don't have the merge working with us, we may well lose. The ISA will be destroyed and every member race will be enslaved by the Drakh and Invaders."

That is something I am prepared to risk my life and that of my family to prevent. Are you willing to do the same?"

I was startled to see the sadness in Alwyn's eyes and I knew that for once he was being completely sincere. He was risking everything for the safety of the galaxy and he wanted me to do the same. I felt a moment of doubt, not wanting to risk my life, my home, my family and everything I valued in this war. But I knew if I didn't take the fight to the enemy, they would bring it to me. And if I allowed that to happen, I would lose. That wasn't something I was prepared to consider.

Why is it that when I most want to be bad-tempered and stubborn, suddenly everyone gets all reasonable and heroic around me? I swear they do it deliberately, just to make me feel bad.

"Do you know why they're gathering at Coriana VI, Alwyn?" I wondered if our enemies saw some tactical advantage from gathering their forces there.

Alwyn nodded. "That system is a good place from which to start an attack on the ISA and the Drakh are also drawn to the place from which their masters launched their voyage beyond the Rim. For the same reason the Technomage order reveres that location. While I hesitate to attribute superstition to either the Drakh or those Mages who have joined them, I suspect both groups think Coriana VI would be a fortuitous locality from which to launch their attack."

I nodded. "They're not the only ones who are superstitious about that system. The Rangers venerate it, too, as the place John Sheridan's empty ship was found. I think a lot of people in the Rangers and in the ISA would feel it's a fitting site for one last battle against the Drakh and their allies."

I turned to Deborah to ask her opinion, but I didn't need to speak. She was smiling softly, her love for me making her eyes shine. I felt her love wash over me, and sensed the strength and courage that lay at my wife's core. She said softly, "We'll do this together, Matthew. Together we can win any fight."

Her confidence in me is sometimes overwhelming. She makes me want to be a better man than I am, and I find myself jumping through hoops, doing anything and everything I can to try to live up to her expectations. Sometimes I wish she would just see me for the double-dealing, double-talking, suspicious, second-guessing individual I really am. But not today.

I watched as Deborah turned to the viewscreen and said, "Alwyn, have you found a way to replace Ilas in the merge? Without her we're seriously weakened. I don't know how much help we can be."

I turned to look at the viewscreen again and saw that Alwyn was smiling. "Yes, my dear. I think I have found a way and to be honest, I don't understand why we all didn't see it sooner. It's so obvious. You need a shape shifter as a part of the merge, and you have one to hand. Vya can stand in his mother's place."

My chin dropped so far I'm amazed it didn't hit my knee. Vya? Part of the merge? Could he do it? For a moment, I was appalled when I realized how close I'd come to sending Vya off with Marcus on the mission to Draxis. What would have happened if he hadn't been on Minbar when Alwyn and his fellow Mages arrived?

Before I could speak, Deborah said, "I don't understand, Alwyn. My sisters and I have to link to initiate the merge. We can't link with Vya. Only his mother could do that."

Alwyn smiled gently at us. "Are you sure of that? Have you ever tried? Vya is genetically almost identical to his mother. She manipulated his DNA in uterus to make him so. Only his eyes show his paternal ancestry and only his sex differentiates him from his mother otherwise. I believe it should be possible to link him to you and your sisters. When I arrive, I will bring with me Technomage Healers who can help with that process. Then we can bring the power of the merge back to life and use that power to defeat our enemies."

Deborah and I sat, speechless, for a moment. When I thought about it, Alwyn was right. Why hadn't we considered this before? Deborah could have tried linking to her 'nephew' at any time since we'd been living on Minbar but she'd never attempted it. For a moment, I wondered why, then pushed that thought to one side as I asked, "Is this safe, Alwyn? Since you told us about the threat to Angel and her sisters, they haven't even tried to link. Is there a risk that if they try linking now, it could be detected by the Dark Technomages and used by them to home in on Angel?"

Alwyn nodded. "Yes, there is that risk and that is why I have brought my fellow Mages with me here. Not just to find refuge for their families but to help shield the sisters from the attention of our former colleagues. We need to proceed carefully, at first linking only Demon and Vya, and only if that is successful, bringing Angel into the link. We will need to wait until we join the Excalibur to complete the merge with Lily, but until that last phase is successful we will have to guard the sisters and Vya carefully. We cannot allow any indication of these plans to leak to our enemies."

I took a deep breath. "Now, hold on, Alwyn. You're taking a lot for granted here. You're assuming that Delenn will allow you and your fellow Mages and their families to come to Minbar. You're assuming that Deborah and Angel are willing to risk exposure while they experiment with linking to Vya. You're assuming that Vya will be willing to participate in this experiment. And not least, you're assuming that I'll allow my wife and her family to put themselves at risk in this way. I'm going to need a lot of convincing to make me sure this is a good idea and that it's safe."



Needless to say, Deborah had plenty to contribute on this subject and our discussions went on for some time. By the time Alwyn and Deborah had overcome every objection I could raise, Trulann came back to me with a message from Delenn. I called a halt to the conversation while my XO reported.

As I'd expected, Delenn welcomed the Technomages and their families and had given instructions for their ships to land at the Rangers' space port. She then asked for the help of some of my Rangers in organizing accommodation and provisions for the refugees within the Ranger compound. Given how many of my people were out in space on board ship at that time, accommodating around one hundred incomers didn't present too many difficulties.

I left Trulann to organize the details of getting the Technomages settled and also asked him to get started on issuing orders for the Excalibur, the White Star fleet and any other ships that could be spared from ISA member fleets to head for Coriana VI.

Delenn had been working in the background for weeks, preparing the ISA members for the possibility that the rift invasion in Sector 14 could be a prelude to all-out war, persuading them to make their home fleets ready and available to the ISA should the need arise. It looked as though all her hard work would not be in vain. We'd need every ship we could get our hands on.

After a few moments discussion on the details of the plan Trulann signed off and I turned back to the viewscreen on which Alwyn waited with surprising patience. "OK, Alwyn, bring your Mages in, then meet me at the training center with whatever people you need to keep my wife and Vya safe. We'll start with just the two of them, before involving Angel and Jack."

I really wasn't looking forward to briefing my doppelganger on what we had planned. To say he wouldn't be happy was the understatement of the year. Part of me really hoped that Deborah would be unable to link with Vya and that Alwyn's plans would end there. But, deep down, I knew that Alwyn was right. If the forces of darkness were gathering, then we'd need every asset we had to fight them, and that included the merge. If we wanted to save our homes, our families and everything we believed in, then we would have to risk everything.

Knowing this to be true didn't make it any easier to accept.

I also knew that as a result of what Alwyn had just told us I was going to have to call Susan Ivanova and tell her that I didn't have a ship to send to the Draxis system to investigate the continuing silence from Marcus Cole and Mal Fillion. I knew exactly how Ivanova would react, and it didn't help that I knew she would agree that rescuing Marcus and Mal should take a lower priority than getting as many ships as possible to Coriana VI. All I could do for the moment was to ensure we made contact with Marcus' Drazi friends and ask them to go looking for our missing Rangers.

Once I'd made those calls, I knew that I'd need to get back to Trulann, and with Deborah's help, the three of us would need to start work on organizing our forces. It was going to be a busy afternoon, and the days ahead were not going to get any easier.

Deborah Gideon

It was late afternoon before Matthew and I made our way down to the main Ranger training center on his motorbike. I love riding pillion with Matthew, as it allows me to pull myself tightly against his back, inhaling his unique, musky scent combined with the smell of his leather jacket. Those aromas and the vibration of the bike between my legs could leave me aroused and ready to pounce on my husband as soon as we drew to a halt. But this time I dismounted the bike with no thoughts of immediately mounting Matthew. To say I was distracted is an understatement.

Since talking to Alwyn about bringing Vya into the merge with my sisters, I'd been busy helping Matthew and Trulann organize the fleet's gathering at Coriana VI but in my few free moments I'd been completely lost in thought, wondering why linking with Vya in this way had never occurred to me before. Why had I never tried to link to Vya? Why had I never tried to link to any of my nieces or nephews? Ilas and Lily had always been able to link to their children, and I had been able to link to my sisters, so what had stopped us trying to build another link in the chain?

I've never really questioned the mental link I have with my sisters. It has been there from the moment we were awakened by the Vorlons after our abduction. It had been our main comfort and support during the period of our training and development, the time when we'd been subjected to the excruciating examinations and experiments carried out by those monsters to bring out our powers.

We'd suffered intolerably, but we'd suffered together and we'd helped each other heal from the wounds, mental and physical, that had been inflicted upon us. None of us ever spoke of those times, not to each other or to our families, but those experiences had welded us together in a way that could only be broken by death.

And death had taken one of us away. Ila had given her life to save us all, leaving her children in my care, but it had never occurred to me to try and use that mental link to comfort those children. How could I have been so remiss? Of course, we lost Ilori so soon after Ila that there had never been a chance to build the relationship that would have been a necessary part of any attempt. But Vya had been a part of my family on Minbar for years. What had stopped me reaching out to him?

I finally had to admit the reason to myself; there was a part of me that had never much liked Vya. I cared for him as my sister's son, but I never really grew fond of him. It was ironic that as an empath, the only person's true feelings that were hidden from me were my own. Now I had to face those feelings, examine them and find out what lay behind them.

Please don't misunderstand me. I've cared for Vya since he was a child. I've done my utmost to make him part of our family since he lost his parents and his sister in such a short time. I knew I could never replace his mothers, but I've done everything I can to make him feel safe, secure and loved. It's just... well, it has always been an effort. It has never come naturally.

I realize now that my antipathy had begun nearly twenty years ago, when Vya was just a small child, and it was through no fault of his. We'd been called to a planet where Vya's parents were taking part in an archeological excavation. People were dying in unexpected ways and the Excalibur was sent to investigate.

We eventually found out that Vya's father, Max Eilerson, had discovered a buried Apocalypse Box, and like the one that Matthew had carried with him for years, it had been occupied. The being locked inside had escaped and had 'possessed' Vya's body. We'd eventually been able to extract the possessor and Vya had returned to his body. But not before untold damage had been done.

*Matthew, Angel, Lily and I had all been badly injured; Lily had almost died. And while the being had occupied Vya's body, it had acted in awful ways, injuring many of us, bullying the other children, as well as murdering one of Matthew's crew and several miners on the planet below. And I know that the murder was more important than the bullying, but it was *my* child he bullied. It was my son who cried and whose tears I had to dry. I also know it wasn't really Vya who did that; I'd sensed the hostility within Vya but at the time I hadn't been able to identify it as coming from an alien being. I'd just felt that he was a very disagreeable child.*

It was salutary to learn that I'd never really got over the aversion I'd felt towards Vya then, and that it had affected my feelings about him ever since. That was unfair, and I was suitably ashamed of myself. Now I had to do something about it. Now I had to allow myself to drop the barriers that

stood between me and my sister's son, to allow him access to my mind, my thoughts and my feelings, but all the while making sure that he never found out about my antipathy.

It felt like an intrusion, almost a violation, to allow someone other than my sisters and my son to know me that well. To know me even better than my husband did. But I had to get beyond my resistance; I had to push through any negative feelings I had toward Vya. I had to do this for myself, for Vya and-if Alwyn was correct, as he mostly was-for the sake of the galaxy. No pressure there then!

These were the thoughts that had occupied my mind so completely since Alwyn had called. These were the conclusions that had me preoccupied and distracted. I'd learned something about myself that I didn't particularly like and I had to deal with it.

So I swung myself off the back of Matthew's motorbike, took a deep breath and strode towards the door of the Ranger's training center. The Technomages were waiting there to support and protect me as I tried to link with Vya.

The main hall there was usually dedicated to holding large meetings, to physical training when the weather outside was inclement, and to the annual graduation ceremonies when we sent new Rangers out into the galaxy to defend the ISA.

Today it would be my turn to graduate; to deal with the issues that had burdened me for years, without me even being aware. But before I could push open the doors to the auditorium, I found my son barring the way.

Marcus stood blocking the doorway and said quietly to my husband and me, "You can't go in. There's a Keeper in there."

Matthew Gideon

I'd been aware of Deborah's preoccupation since our discussion with Alwyn, but I'd decided to let her think through whatever was bothering her. And yes, the curiosity was driving me crazy but I held it in check and told myself to trust my wife. She'd tell me in her own good time if she felt I needed to know. Do you have any idea how much I hate being reasonable and patient?

I took her hand as we walked toward the main hall of the training center and couldn't help showing my surprise when our son blocked our way. When I heard why he was obstructing the doorway, it took everything I had not to throw Deborah over my shoulder and run back to my motorbike with her, dragging her away from danger as quickly as I could. Well, there's also the fact that she's not exactly a lightweight-why did I choose to marry an Amazon?-and I'm not sure I can still do a fireman's lift with her.

Instead I pulled her hard to my side and said, "Who's carrying it?"

Marcus shook his head, "I don't know exactly. One of the Mages. They all came in together, and I felt it immediately, but I didn't want to draw attention, so I just told them I'd find out what was delaying you and I got out of there."

My son is smart. He gets that from me. OK, so my wife isn't exactly a dumb blonde either, but he gets most of his smarts from me. That and a tendency to forget things like contraceptive shots. He also had experience of detecting Keepers. Marcus had felt the one attached to the previous Centauri Emperor, Londo Mollari, when he'd been only three years old and no one else had known about it.

"Is Alwyn in there with them?" Deborah spoke softly, keeping whatever she was feeling under tight control.

"Not yet. I was just about to call him, then you got here. I'll call him now." Marcus lifted his wrist to his mouth and went to key his commlink, but I raised my hand to stop him.

"Let's go back outside. I don't want there to be any chance of them overhearing us."

We walked in silence back to the motorbike, while I cursed under my breath. Alwyn had brought a mole into our midst. Unlike most people, a Technomage could not be carrying a Keeper unwillingly. For any other being, a Keeper couldn't be removed without killing the host. But for Mages, the nanomites in their blood could be used to kill off the tentacles that a Keeper embedded deep into its victim. We'd learned that when Angel had been implanted with one of the monsters and only Galen's blood donation had allowed her to be freed from it.

So if there was a Keeper attached to a Technomage it meant that the Mage was a willing host. And it was the perfect way for the Drakh to spy on us. The keeper was connected telepathically to the Drakh master from which it'd been spawned. If we'd gone through with our plans in its presence, the Drakh would have been alerted to our attempts to rebuild the merge. The enemy having that foreknowledge could have been a disaster. My main concern now was whether Alwyn had already confided in his colleagues about the reason for our gathering in the main hall. If he had, we were in deep trouble.



This was all racing through my mind as we walked into the late afternoon sun and I went to activate my commlink. But before I could do so, Alwyn and Sarah rounded the corner of the building, walking hand in hand towards us.

Usually the sight of Sarah Chambers would have been enough to make me smile. It had been far too long since I'd last seen my former medical officer. But now I was too worried and scared to do more than nod a brief greeting to her before turning to her husband.

"Alwyn, we have a problem. One of your colleagues has a Keeper attached and they're waiting for us inside. Have you told them about the merge and what we planned to do today?"

It was the first time in my life that I have ever seen the Mage look shaken. "A Keeper? It can't be... How do you... Oh shit! Who is it?"

The expletive would have made me smile had our situation not been so serious. I nodded toward Marcus.

"Marcus felt it but he didn't hang around to pin it down. As far as we know, Keepers can't tell when an empath has detected them, but he thought it better to alert us before there was any chance of that

happening. But it might already be too late. Do they know why they're here today and what we have planned?"

Alwyn let out a deep breath. "No. I planned to tell them once we were all gathered together. I didn't want to risk opening communication channels between our ships unnecessarily."

That was a relief at least. I felt the tension around us dissipate a little. The ball hadn't quite been dropped as yet, but there was a serious fumble in progress that needed saving. And that would take some planning. I thought for a moment then started to give orders.

"OK, here's what we're going to do." I turned to Sarah Chambers and said, "Sarah, I hate to ask this, but could you go in there and start telling some fancy lies?"

Sarah raised an eyebrow and gave me an ironic smile. "It's hardly the first time you've asked me to lie for you, Matthew, is it? So what do you want this time?" Memories of how we'd deceived Earth about the testing we'd carried out on Theta 49 at the time of the search for a cure to the Drakh plague came rushing back, but I pushed them to one side.

"I want you to tell the Mages that Alwyn and I have been summoned to a meeting with Deleenn and we'll join them as soon as we can. In the meantime, we've organized some refreshments for them, which will be delivered shortly. Can you do that?"

Sarah nodded, and I went on, "Before you go in, I'd like a suggestion for a drug that we can dose the food and drink with, that will knock the Mages out quickly, but won't have any long lasting effects."

This time Sarah's eyebrow nearly hit her hairline. "You're going to drug them?"

I nodded. "Yes. I want them all out cold when we go in and extract our mole. I don't want a fight where innocent bystanders could get hurt, and I don't want any of my people hurt either. And it needs to be something that the Technomages won't detect."

Sarah nodded slowly. "That's a tall order, Matt, but I have an idea about what you need. Let me just consult with Alwyn for a moment." The two of them took a couple of steps to one side and went into a huddle, so I turned to my wife and son.

"I really, ~~really~~ don't want you to do this, but it could save some lives, so I'm going to ask you both to go in there with Sarah. Tell them that while they're waiting for the food and drinks to arrive, you'd like to get their views on the accommodation they've been given, and what else we could do to make their stay more comfortable. Tell them you'll talk to each of them individually, so we can be sure we understand everyone's specific needs. Make it clear that the Entil'Zha wants them treated as VIPs and that's why he's sent his wife and son to make sure they're properly taken care of."

Deborah and Marcus both nodded, immediately understanding that I was setting things up so that they'd have time alone with each of the Mages, allowing them to identify the carrier of the Keeper.

I went on, "I'll have Rangers bringing in tables and chairs, as well as the food and drink. They'll all be fully armed and they'll stay in with you, setting things up, until the refreshments are delivered, then you can invite everyone to sit down and eat. The Rangers will act as servers, while you three

can do your host act, encouraging them all to eat, drink and be merry. Or in this case, eat, drink and fall asleep."

Sarah and Alwyn rejoined us and told us they knew of a drug that could be incorporated into the food and drink. Sarah said, "It's tasteless, odorless and fast acting, so you'll need to make sure that they all consume it at the same time."

Deborah nodded. "I think I can do that. I'll ask them to drink a toast to the Rangers, the Entil'Zha and his wonderful hospitality."

My wife looked at me and winked. Her eyes were sparkling and I could see the prospect of what lay ahead had snapped her out of whatever had been bothering her over the previous few hours.

"OK, ladies and gentleman, go to it. Keep them calm and happy until reinforcements arrive."

Sarah, Deborah and Marcus nodded and left us, Deborah only pausing briefly to kiss my cheek and whisper, "Don't worry, Matthew, we'll be fine."

I watched her butt sway in her snug jeans as she walked away from me and prayed she was correct. As they disappeared through the doors into the hall, I turned to Alwyn and said, "We have some organizing to do. Let's do it."

Trusting Sarah and Deborah to keep the Mages occupied inside the hall, I started making calls, organizing everything we needed. Alwyn did whatever Technomages do to make sure my calls weren't picked up by his colleagues inside the hall, while he listened to what I was setting up and only interjected when I needed the name of the drug to be added to the food and drink. Once I'd finished my calls I turned to Alwyn and asked, "So do you have any ideas about who is carrying the Keeper?"

Alwyn nodded. "Ideas, yes, but I cannot be certain. There were, however, four people whom I had not expected to join us and who only came over to us at the last moment. I think one of them is most likely to be the carrier. If it is, we'll need to be very careful, Matthew, as two of them are trained Warrior Technomages. If one of the Warriors is carrying the Keeper, we'll need to take extreme care in how we confine her once she revives. A Warrior Technomage is a terrible enemy, and they can break down most barriers easily. The first thing we'll need to do is to take away her staff and destroy it. That won't be easy but it will be essential if we are to keep her from harming your people."

I nodded, remembering how distraught Galen had been when he thought he'd lost his staff on the planet where the rogue Technomage had made a virus to drive the population mad. He'd called it a 'control mechanism' and implied that without it he was weakened. Well, if I had another rogue Warrior Technomage on my hands, I wanted him or her as weak as possible.

"Can you handle that, Alwyn? Can you break the staff?" I remembered Angel telling me how Alwyn had broken Galen's staff after the younger Mage's attack on my wife, so I was fairly sure he could do it.

Alwyn nodded. "If I must, I can. And in this case, I must." He took a deep breath and gave me a sad smile. "I see the first of your Rangers is arriving with the food and drink. We need to be out of sight

from the doors to the hall, or my colleagues will become aware of our ruse."

So while our wives deceived the Technomages, Alwyn and I retreated into ignominious hiding, waiting for their signal that the plan had worked. I wished I'd been able to think of a strategy that put us at risk while keeping Sarah, Deborah and Marcus safe, but life is never that easy or convenient. Sometimes it just sucks.

Deborah Gideon

Matthew's plan worked perfectly. Sarah made a short speech apologizing for the delay and introducing Marcus and me, then we split the Technomages into two groups and started interviewing them. They were all very eager to tell us what additional needs they had and we made careful and copious notes, assuring them that we would do our utmost to ensure their stay on Minbar was as comfortable as possible.

The ninth Mage I interviewed, a Healer called Brant, was carrying the Keeper. He was a small man, bald, as were all the Mages, thin to the point of emaciation, with discontented brown eyes, cheekbones like knife-blades and a mouth that was pressed tightly into a hard line. He was not a physically attractive man and his personality was no better. He was full of complaints about his accommodation and demanded to know when he would have access to the Entil'Zha to make his displeasure known.



I reassured him gently that my husband would join us as soon as his meeting with the President of the ISA was over, and he moved away with a disgruntled humph. Immediately he turned away I linked to Marcus. //Got him. It's the little man walking away from me now. Let's wrap this up as quickly as we can.//I kept my mental tone as neutral as possible, not wanting my son to feel the wave of nausea and fear that had swept through me when I'd detected the presence of the Keeper. Those monsters are pure evil and being in their presence is repulsive.

I'd first come across a Keeper many years before on board the Excalibur. I hadn't known it at the time, but I'd sensed it attached to the old Centauri Emperor, Londo Mollari. Londo had been an unwilling carrier of the Keeper and I'd sensed the Centauri's feelings of regret and affection for humans, and the conflict between those feelings and the hatred of humanity that had oozed from the Keeper.

I hadn't understood the contradiction at the time, but it had become clearer when I'd found that my sister, Angel, had had one of the monsters attached to her. I'd known instantly that my sister was no longer in control of her body and had been able to warn Matthew. I'd never forgotten the feel of the Keeper since then. I don't think I ever could forget the sense of unadulterated malevolence that emanates from those monstrosities. How anyone could agree to carry one willingly was beyond my comprehension.

//OK, Mum, but let's just check to make sure there are no others that have snuck in.//

It was a good point. We didn't know that there was only one Keeper, but we soon had confirmation on that point. Brant was the sole carrier.

While we were interviewing the last of the Mages, Rangers started arriving with tables, chairs, place settings, food and drink. They speedily set up the hall with the tables in a U-shape, chairs neatly placed around them and places set. I finished my last interview and called everyone to attention.

"Please, would you all like to sit? I hope there is something here to everyone's taste, but do let us know if there's anything else you need."

I glanced at Sarah and she moved rapidly to take a seat at the center table. I sat next to her and Marcus joined the other Rangers in starting to pour drinks for all the seated Mages. I noticed that he'd maneuvered himself so he was serving Brant and the Mages who sat either side of him, but he did so in a completely natural way. My son has inherited some of his father's devious cunning.

Before anyone could start on the food and drink, I stood, noisily scraping my chair back to draw attention to myself.

"I would like to welcome you all to the Ranger compound and again emphasize how welcome you are. We will do everything we can to make your stay comfortable, and in the meantime, I would like you to join me in a toast. Will you raise your glasses, please?"

I paused, waiting to be sure that all the Mages had full glasses raised in front of them, then went on, "To the future friendship of the Rangers and the Technomages." It was a toast that none of them could object to, given their acceptance of our hospitality.

I lifted the glass to my mouth, making it appear that I was drinking, but did not let any of the liquid enter my mouth. I was sure that the Rangers would have made certain my drink was not drugged, but accidents happen, and I was taking no chances. Whatever drug Sarah and Alwyn had come up with, it was certainly effective. Ten seconds later every Mage in the room was unconscious.

The doors to the hall were flung open and more Rangers flooded in, led by Matthew and Alwyn. Matthew rushed to my side and hugged me tightly against him, letting me feel all his fear and apprehension for me. I buried my head in his neck and allowed a little of my love for him to escape, just enough for him to feel but not so much that anyone else would detect it. That earned me a kiss on the forehead and then he released me, saying "Which one is it?"

I led him, Alwyn and Sarah to where Brant lay slumped across the table and pointed. "The Keeper is attached to the right side of his neck."

Alwyn asked, "Is it unconscious?"

I nodded. "Whatever you and Sarah came up with, it seems to affect the Keeper in the same way as the Technomages." I remembered that Emperor Mollari had been able to render his Keeper unconscious for short periods using alcohol. Fortunately, it seemed that our drugs had the same affect, and although I could still sense the malevolent entity, it was now dormant.

Alwyn was holding Sarah's hand tightly and I could feel he had been just as apprehensive as Matthew. How they must have hated standing outside, waiting, while Sarah and I could have been in danger.

Matthew gestured to some of the Rangers to come and carry Brant away, but Alwyn had other ideas. While the other Rangers prepared to give the Mages the antidote, he asked the four men carrying Brant to lay him out on the top table, himself taking possession of Brant's staff as they moved the traitor. We cleared a space for the comatose Mage, and waited while the others were revived.

As you might imagine, many of them were extremely unhappy when they found out what had been done to them, and it took a while before Alwyn could calm them down. He dropped the base of his staff heavily to the floor and the room shuddered.

"Let me show you why this was necessary." Alwyn's powerful voice projected over all the others raised in acrimony and he lifted his staff again. The other voices died away and they all watched him carefully as he lifted his own staff in one hand and Brant's staff in the other.

A hazy shimmer appeared between the two staffs. Alwyn shifted his grip until he was holding both staffs by the end, then lowered the other ends until one rested on Brant's forehead and the other on his chest. He nodded at Matthew, who moved forward, grabbing one of the knives from the table and using it to slash through the cowl neck of Brant's robe. As the material fell away from Brant's neck, the Keeper was exposed, clearly visible through the energy field Alwyn had created, its single eye closed.

Alwyn said nothing, just waited for the uproar to die down. The other Technomages reacted with a wide range of emotions, with terror and anger dominant. The two Warrior Mages in the group had to be restrained by Rangers, or I think they would have killed Brant on the spot.

Once the hubbub had subsided, Alwyn asked, "What is the appropriate punishment for having brought this abomination amongst us?"

He waited while the Mages gathered in groups, muttering amongst themselves, moving around until finally a tall woman stepped forward. She was one of the Mages I'd interviewed, another Healer called Synnove, and she seemed to be respected by the group as a whole. Her voice was deep and calm as she pronounced, "He will be flayed and banished."

I shuddered, realizing that they planned the ultimate punishment for a Mage, not as you might imagine a death sentence, but the removal of all his implants, so that he could no longer use his powers, then banishment from the Technomage order. This was worse than death for a Mage.

Alwyn nodded and asked, "Is this the will of you all?"

There was a resounding 'Yes!' from the group.

Alwyn turned to Matthew, who had stood silent while all this proceeded. "Could I ask that your Rangers carry Brant to my ship? Sarah will go with them and ensure he remains unconscious. We will carry out the sentence at dawn tomorrow. In the meantime, we should proceed with our original plans."

I could feel Matthew's discomfort with what the Technomages planned to do the traitor in their midst, but we had no alternative to offer. A rogue Mage is incredibly dangerous and we couldn't afford to have someone with Brant's powers loose to act against us. There were enough Technomages on their way to join the enemy already. We couldn't afford to send them another ally.

So Brant's body was carried out, along with Sarah, who carried Brant's staff, and the rest of us finally sat down to eat the food that had been brought in earlier. All the drinks and glasses were replaced, so there was no risk of anyone getting drugged again. It was a quiet meal, and I found it difficult to eat anything when I considered what lay ahead. Vya had joined Marcus in helping serve the meal, and I was painfully conscious of his presence.

He was wearing the anonymous human Ranger appearance that he usually displayed when in the Ranger compound, giving no clue to his true identity. I wondered how much of a shock it would be to the Mages when they realized they had a shape-shifter in their midst and just what we wanted them to do. And I wondered how I was going to get through the next few hours. But then Matthew grasped my hand under the table and I felt his love and his strength. Then I knew that as long as he loved me, I could do anything that was needed of me.

Matthew Gideon

If you've stuck with this story this long, then you know me well enough by now to imagine just how much I enjoyed standing outside the Ranger auditorium while my wife and son were inside, potentially in danger. Now triple that frustration and increase by a factor of ten, and you might get somewhere close to how Alwyn and I were feeling while we waited. I don't think I have ever seen Alwyn look quite so menacing, and he's scared me witless on a number of previous occasions. I was just glad that he'd left Ishtar on his ship that day, or someone would have got severely burned, and based on previous experience-it probably would have been me.

So when we got the all-clear signal, we both hit the doors like a landslide and it was fortunate that there was enough room for us to enter together, or one of us would have had footprints on their back and it wouldn't have been me. Now I'm not saying that Alwyn wouldn't have stood a chance, but I'm damned sure that those implants in his back would have been embedded a little deeper once I'd got through that door. It's a primitive man thing to want to protect your woman, and just then I was feeling like a very primitive man.

Once I'd done my caveman bit and dragged Deborah to my side, she very kindly didn't remind me that she didn't really need my protection and just sent me a little wave of love that only I could feel, reminding me why I kept her as my number one-OK, my only wife. If I'd ever been stupid enough to try adding a number two, I don't like to think where Deborah's Denn'bok would have ended up. She'd got very handy with that Ranger fighting staff over the previous few years.

So during the next few minutes I held my peace-and my wife-while the Mages sorted out what they wanted to do with the traitor in their midst. As I said, I can be a primitive kind of guy, but even I flinched at the 'flaying' bit. That wasn't so much primitive as positively medieval. But the traitor was one of their kind, so it was really up to the Technomages what they did with him; I just hoped they wouldn't invite me to watch.



During the somewhat subdued meal that followed Brant's departure under Sarah's supervision, I was all too aware of Deborah eating and drinking very little. I could sense her apprehension at what lay ahead so reached out for her hand under the table and gave it a gentle squeeze, sending my love for her and my confidence in her, hoping that would help. I was rewarded with a loving smile that, as usual, melted my internal organs into mush while stiffening my resolve-amongst other things. Deborah has the unique ability to make some of my organs go soft, while

simultaneously making another organ rock hard.

Having decided that standing wouldn't be a good idea for a while, I leaned across to Alwyn and said softly, "I think we really ought to get this show on the road. Will you tell them what we want from them now?"

Alwyn nodded and stood, banging his staff on the floor to gain everyone's attention. I didn't listen too carefully as he spoke, as I was focused on thinking of icebergs, cold showers and the Drakh. That soon unstiffened what had hardened and firmed up what had softened.

Alwyn finished his speech and there was a murmuring amongst the Mages that indicated their consternation, but soon enough Synnove, the woman they seemed to have elected as their spokesperson, stood and said, "I understand why you kept silent about the source of the dark powers we all sensed at times in the past. And now that so many of our order have gone to join the Forces of Darkness, the wisdom of your decision has been justified. But it is a sign of these sad times that Technomages have been forced to deceive each other in this way."

Synnove sighed, then went on, "We can provide the barrier you require, Alwyn, but it has been a long day and many of us are tired. If there were time, I would suggest waiting until the morning, but I know that events are moving too rapidly for such a delay. Let us proceed."

So the Rangers moved all the tables and chairs out of the hall, and the Mages formed a circle, with Alwyn at its center. Once all the Rangers other than Vya had left, Alwyn beckoned my wife and my nephew to join him.

Deborah was as tense as a bowstring as she stood alongside me and I sensed her reluctance to proceed. I put my arms around her and turned her to face me, saying quietly, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Deborah gave me a sad smile, "Yes, I do. I'd never forgive myself if I backed out of this and then the merge was needed. I have to try. I just wish I didn't."

I pulled her to me and kissed her, hard and deep, knowing that she would be able to feel my love for her, my passion and my pride. Then I let her go and watched as she moved through the gap in the

circle the Mages had left for her, joining Alwyn and Vya. The Mages moved to close the gap and I found I couldn't see what was happening, as the Mages' backs blocked my view. So I moved rapidly and vaulted up onto the podium which stood at the end of the hall, giving me a good vantage point to watch proceedings.

As it turned out, from my perspective, very little happened. The Mages all started humming softly, and a diffuse, iridescent field formed around and above their circle. I could easily see through the field to where Deborah and Vya stood, holding each other's hands, as Alwyn stood beside them, laying his staff across them where they touched.

Vya had dropped his human form, and showed his natural self, golden skinned and purple haired, with only the bright blue eyes he'd inherited from his father, Max Eilerson, remaining unchanged. He and Deborah stood silently, still as statues, while the Technomages murmured around them.

After a few moments, I saw Deborah take a step backwards, dropping Vya's hands and giving Alwyn an anguished look. Her voice was cracking with distress as she said, "It's not working, Alwyn. I can't do it."

Everything in me wanted to run to her side, to comfort her, to tell her that it didn't matter, that we'd manage without the merge on our side, but I knew I'd be lying and my wife can always detect a lie. So somehow I kept myself still and watched as Alwyn smiled gently, saying, "It's difficult, I know, but I have an idea."

He turned to Vya and asked, "Can you shift into another shape, please Vya? Can you take your mother's form?"

Both Deborah and Vya gasped at this request, and both looked deeply troubled. Alwyn went on, "Vya, your genetic structure is identical to your mother in all respects except for your eyes and your sex. The latter you can change at will. The closer you can become to 'being' Ilas, the closer your connection with her sisters."

He then turned to Deborah and said, "Try to imagine that this is Ilas, your sister, your surrogate daughter when you lived on Eriadne. You cared for her and loved her. Remember those feelings, relive them, then feel her with you again, before you and holding you. She needs you, Demon, she needs your love and your protection. Send her those feelings."

Deborah's tears trickled down her face as she again faced Vya, who had now taken Ilas' form. But not the Ilas we'd last seen when she was old and sick. This was the young Ilas, strong and vigorous, passionate and happy. This Ilas reached out for Deborah's hands and took them in her own, saying softly, "Don't cry for me. My life was everything I could ever have wished for. I loved and was loved. I was cared for and protected. Let me help protect you and all the people you love."

Alwyn's staff lowered again to touch Deborah and Vya/Ilas where their hands joined and this time a glowing field started to grow from that point. It pulsed, golden yellow, warm like the sun on a gentle spring day, growing outwards until it filled the area surrounded by the Mages. Those whose faces I could see started to smile and although I couldn't pick up any sensations from inside their protective ring, I knew they were feeling the power of Deborah's empathic sending. And what she

was sending was her love. Her love for me, her children, her sisters and for everything good and wholesome in the galaxy. And I felt bereft that I was excluded.

I wanted to jump down from the podium, rushing to break through the encircling Mages, to join my wife and allow myself to wallow in that sensation. I wanted to yell that this wasn't fair; that her love was mine and I didn't want to share it. I felt angry, hurt, lonely, and jealous that she should allow others to feel her love. And I felt ashamed of my selfishness. There are times when even I know just how much of a jerk I can be.

So I somehow kept myself in place, not moving, not shouting my protests or resentments, just waiting until it was over. I watched as Deborah's face broke into a smile and heard her say softly, "Ilas."

For a moment, I knew she'd forgotten that her sister was no longer with us, forgotten that Ilas didn't stand in front of her again. Then I saw her smile change; it became sadder but remained in place as she said, "Vya. Thank you."

Then they broke their hold on each other and my wife looked over the heads of the Mages to where I was standing. She flung herself across the room, pushing the Mages aside as she raced towards me, meeting me as I jumped down from the podium, throwing herself at me and clinging to me as I held her tightly, kissing her, stroking her hair and her back, loving her with all my heart and soul.

When I ran out of breath I lifted my mouth from Deborah's and whispered, "Did it work?" Deborah said nothing, just looking up at me, her eyes filled with love and happiness.

It was Vya who answered, even though he was far enough away from us that he couldn't possibly have heard my question.

"Yes, it worked."

Jack Gideon

We'd been on Minbar for nearly a month and I had to admit that both Angelique and I were getting used to being settled in one place. We'd begun to appreciate having a social life that consisted of more than the small crew that we kept with us on Serenity. And for the period we'd been staying with Matt and Demon, we'd enjoyed the additional facilities that living in a house provided.

Not that we were uncomfortable on Serenity. When she'd been built we'd made sure that we had a decent living space, with a big bed and most importantly, a luxurious bathroom with enough hot water to making bathing enjoyable. But that still didn't quite match the swimming pool and gym that were a feature of the Entil'Zha's quarters on Minbar.

So my wife and I had used our time on Minbar to arrange a lease on some offices and an apartment in Tuzanor, which we could use as a temporary home whenever we visited, as well as the base for our business operations. We'd also hired a couple of local staff and started their training in managing our local business affairs. I wouldn't admit this to everyone, but in general Minbari are more trustworthy than humans. Well, the workers are anyway. Don't get me started on what I think of the Warrior caste.

The next step in our plans was to find another home to use as a base on Earth. This would be our main home, where we planned to spend most of our time in the future. We'd discussed a lot of different locations and were pretty much settled on the idea of finding a coastal property somewhere in New Zealand. We wanted enough space to be able to bring Serenity in to land as and when we needed, as well as to build a decent house with a pool and we wanted our own beach. There was no hurry; we could wait until the right place came onto the market.

You might ask why New Zealand? Well, it's got a climate that suits both Angelique and me, the culture there is friendly and laid back, and-most importantly-it's about as far away from Matt and Demon's home in England as it's possible to get while still being on the same planet.

Now don't get me wrong. I have nothing against my wife's sister. In fact, there are times when I would quite happily put parts of my anatomy against parts of hers in a way we'd both enjoy, but let's not go there.

It's her husband I have a problem with.

You don't need to remind me that her husband is my doppelganger. I know that basically we are the same person. But that doesn't mean I have to like him. I think the thing I most dislike about him is that fact that in this universe, he's the original, so he got to keep the name. Jack is OK as a name, but I liked being Matt. It was my name for forty odd years and I've never quite got over my resentment at having to give it up.

And although my life had turned out pretty damned idyllic in recent years, I still resented the unfairness that had made my universe a hell hole in which all my friends had died, while the Matthew Gideon in this universe had been lauded as the hero who saved Earth. Yes, it was a long time ago, but I'm good at holding grudges, OK?

None of that stops me from tolerating him when I have to, and I suspect most of my negative feelings are well and truly reciprocated. Although what he has to complain about is beyond me. He got the name, he got the career, and he got the plaudits, what more could he want? Well, I guess I didn't have to look far to find that. In fact, I had to look no further than the woman sitting next to me.

This particular evening, I was sitting on the sofa in our quarters on Serenity, reading a book, with my wife curled up alongside me, also reading. Music played softly in the background-don't ask me what, something 20th century that Angelique liked-while I played with my wife's soft hair and considered suggesting an early night. Not that sleeping would be on the agenda for a while. Sleep was never high on the list of priorities once Angelique and I got into bed.

But before I could act on my thoughts, the comm unit sounded. I called out, "Gideon, go."

*As if summoned by my thoughts, Matt's face appeared on the screen across the cabin from where we sat. He scowled when he saw Angelique and me sitting together so I scowled right back at him. "What do *you* want?" I asked. Not the friendliest of greetings and it earned me an elbow in the ribs from Angelique.*

"Hello, Matt. How are you? Is Demon OK?" My wife is much nicer to her brother-in-law than I would like her to be.

Matt's face softened into a smile. "I'm fine, Angel, thanks, and so is Deborah. I hope I'm not interrupting anything..." Like hell he did. He was probably hoping that he was stopping us having sex. "...but I wonder if you and Jack could join us at the Ranger Training center? Alwyn and Sarah are here, and we have something we need your help with."



Matt asking for my help is a rare enough event to warrant my full attention. I was about to get difficult, but then I replayed what he'd said. If Sarah Chambers was there with him, I wanted to see her. It had been far too long since we'd last seen my old Chief Medical Officer. And yes, I know that strictly speaking she's not my old CMO, but I tried not to remember how the Sarah in my universe had killed herself in despair when she couldn't save her family from the Drakh plague. I preferred this universe's Sarah, who'd found the cure and lived happily ever after.

So before Angelique could respond, I said, "We'll be over there in about fifteen to twenty minutes," and I cut the connection.

Angelique frowned up at me as I stood. "That was a little abrupt, wasn't it?"

I grinned and grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet. "I want to see Sarah. It's been too long."

Angelique smiled and lifted herself on tiptoe to kiss me gently on the lips. My response was instant, but I quickly pushed lustful thoughts to one side and said, "Let's go."

We took one of the quadbikes we keep in the cargo bay for transporting ourselves around all types of terrain, and for towing trailers when necessary. I drove, while Angelique sat behind me, snuggling against my back. I know how much she loves riding pillion behind me, as she says she loves to smell my leather jacket and the scent of me.

Riding the quadbike with me could often leave my wife quite aroused and I was usually more than happy to satisfy her needs afterwards, but just for once, when we arrived at the Training Center, we both knew we would have to behave ourselves and contain our baser instincts. Sometimes life is no fun at all. I'd just have to make my own fun from whatever lay ahead, and meeting up with Sarah again made up for a lot. That and the opportunity to plant some verbal darts in my doppelganger's hide.

Oh, you want to know what happened at the Training Center?

Well, I could give you the long version, which involves Technomages, special force screens, Vya, Demon and Angelique holding hands and singing Kumbaya-OK, maybe not the singing-and lots of witticisms, verbal sparring and snide comments from Matt and me. But if I give you that version I

guess I'd also have to mention the bit where our wives told us both that if we didn't shape up and stop sniping at each other, we'd both be on short rations for the foreseeable future. And I'm not talking about food.

So to save everyone's embarrassment, I'll go with the short version.

It worked.

Deborah, Vya and Angelique were able to link. All they needed was Lily to bring in the final piece of the merge. Then watch out universe!

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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