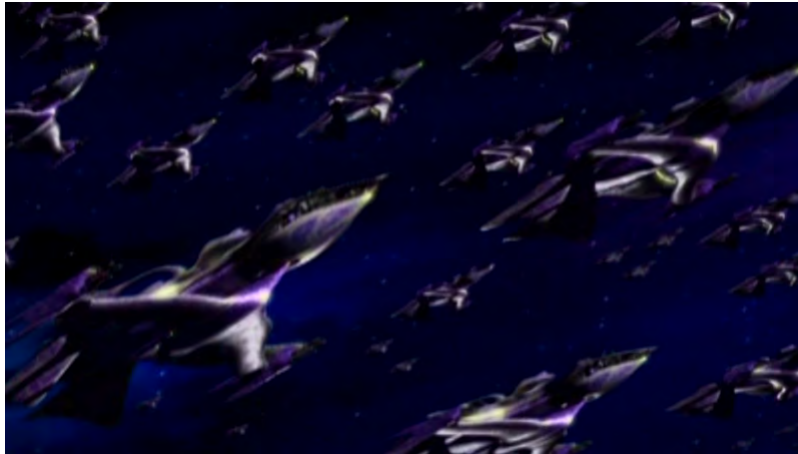


The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Five B - Part 4: Darkness Descends

by The Space Witches



The White Star fleet

Chapter 4

27th July 2291

Matthew Gideon

It was another Monday when I stood in front of the mirror in my bedroom, looking at myself, kitted out for once in my full Entil'Zha uniform. I can't say I was impressed. Usually I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of guy, except when my wife cajoles me into a pair of smart pants and a dress shirt. I've worn uniforms-most of them damned uncomfortable-for far too many years to enjoy wearing one now.

But this was one of those rare occasions when I had to put on the full gear-cloak, sash, hood and Ranger emblem included-as I was about to lead the Rangers to war. And if we lost that war then it might be the end of the Rangers, after they'd existed for a thousand years. Well, that wouldn't happen on my watch if I could help it. So to show my respect, just this once, I had to wear the full kit and caboodle.

I tugged at the neckline of the shirt, which threatened to throttle me, pulled at the sash and tried to settle the outer cloak-like coat more comfortably on my shoulders, but I still felt like a complete idiot. Fortunately, at that moment Deborah came in from the bath room and joined me in front of the mirror. I always prefer to look at my wife, rather than my own image, and as always, she was well worth looking at.

Her hair was swept back from her face, plaited neatly at the nape of her neck. She wore a severely tailored black pantsuit with low-heeled boots. I smiled as I remembered the first time she'd worn that outfit, for her first ever meeting with John Sheridan and Delenn, nearly twenty years before. It still fitted her perfectly, a tribute to the careful diet and exercise regime Deborah followed.



My wife smiled at me in the mirror, then leaned towards me and kissed my cheek, saying, "You look very handsome in that uniform, but this isn't quite right." She adjusted the jeweled emblem I wore on my shoulder that symbolized the Rangers.

It's called an Isil'Zha, which roughly translated, means 'the future'. I could only hope that I had a future that stretched beyond the next few days.

The Isil'Zha is shaped from silver and gold, with the figures of a Minbari and a Human, one on either side, holding the central gem. As with everything in Minbari society, they have a special ceremony for when the metal of the pin is forged. After that, the white-hot emblem is cooled in three bowls. The first is a type of holy water, used in a number of those endless Minbari ceremonies, and the other two are said to be bowls of blood: one of Minbari blood, and one of human blood.

I have no idea where they get the blood from. Not from me, that's for sure. I'm very fond of my blood and try to hang onto it as hard as I can. I've always been a firm believer that it belongs on the inside of my body and having it anywhere else is to be avoided at all costs.

I turned to take my wife into my arms, kissing her thoroughly before replying, "I look like a refugee from Lord of the Rings. Have you seen any hobbits or elves around here recently?"

Deborah smiled and said, "No, but there are a few Rangers around. And the best looking Ranger is right here with me. Eat your heart out, Aragorn."

I love the fact that my wife actually believes it when she says things like that, even when she's completely nuts, as she was then. Before I could tell her so, her face fell into more serious lines and she said, "We'd better go. The children are waiting for us downstairs."

I nodded and took her hand. We left our bedroom and I wondered when or if I would return to that room. If things went badly... I pushed those thoughts aside and walked down the stairs and into our dining room, with Deborah at my side.

Marcus, Mattie, Sali and Ben were waiting for us, seated at the table, with Jean-Luc on Ben's knee. He was fast asleep, which was fortunate as otherwise we'd never have got through what needed to be said. When he's awake, we all spend far too much time playing with him.

I took my normal seat at the head of the table, while Deborah slid into the seat on my left, which the children had left free. Mattie sat to my right, with Sali beyond her, while Marcus sat on Deborah's left, with Ben and Jean-Luc next to him. I could see immediately that my son was not a

happy bunny. He had the same scowl I use when I'm not pleased about something, and it was disconcerting to see how petulant that expression looked on another face. I really should make the effort not to pout like that.

I understood the difficulty Marcus had. I'd given him instructions that he wasn't happy about, and as his father, he would have loved to argue with me. But as well as being his father I was his Entil'Zha and he'd sworn an oath to obey my orders. So while one part of him wanted to scream and stamp his feet in indignation, the professional side of him kept this urge under control, and it only emerged in a bad tempered glower. I decided it would be best to tackle this issue immediately and get it out of the way.

"Marcus, I'm sorry. I know how much you want to join your mother and me on White Star Prime, but I can't take you. You knew when you joined the Rangers that we could never treat you differently from any others in your class of trainees. Your class isn't ready to join this battle, so you can't join it either. None of you have the training or the experience for this fight. So I can't take you with us."

Marcus sighed and shrugged. "I know that, Dad...I mean, Entil'Zha, but I'm sure you understand how I feel. I don't want to be left behind here. I don't want to be just..." He ran out of words and looked down at his hands, which were clenched tightly together in his lap.

"You don't want to be just a babysitter, is that it?" I put as much sympathy as I could into my voice. I watched as Marcus gave the barest of nods but kept his head lowered, staring at his hands.

I went on, "I need you to stay here and be much more than a babysitter, Marcus. I need you here to take care of your son and your sister, Ben and Sali and all the Technomage families that are being left here. Also, Jaysen will be joining you here. He's just as pissed about being left behind as you are, but Alwyn and Sarah have agreed that he's safer here, with you, Marcus, to look out for him. And Oscar. Make sure you look after Oscar, too." Although Oscar was theoretically Marcus's dog, he'd attached himself to me since we'd moved to Minbar, and I didn't want anything bad happening to the poor old soul.

Mattie had been trying to interrupt me for a while but before she could speak, I held my hand up to stop her. "Mattie, I know you don't think you need taking care of. You think you're Xena, Warrior Princess. And I know you can fight as well as most men. But you're not trained and you have no experience of fighting a real battle."

Mattie pouted. "Neither does Marcus."

I watched her glare at her big brother and had to suppress a smile. Mattie had always been competitive with Marcus. "No, Marcus doesn't have experience of a real battle, but he does have some training on what to do. So when your mother and I have left, Marcus is in charge here in the house, and you'll toe the line, Mattie, OK?"

I got silence in return, so I leaned across and took Mattie's chin gently in my hand, forcing her to look at me. "OK?" That produced a reluctant nod.

I sighed and continued, "As you know, we're taking every experienced Ranger with us who's fit for service, only leaving a couple of the older Rangers in command. This includes Sech Rastenn, who'll

be acting as base commander in my absence. You'll take orders from him and you will follow those orders. That applies to all of you."

I looked from Ben to Sali and back again. "I'm sorry you've got caught up in this. We've got messages off to your families letting them know that you're as safe as we can make you. If this doesn't go well, you'll be as secure on Minbar as you would be anywhere. But this compound will not be safe. If the news comes through that we've lost, then Rastenn will give the order to evacuate and you'll go with him and the other trainees to the bunkers deep in the hills. You'll have enough supplies there to last years. You can survive there until..."

Until what? What future would our children have if we lost this fight? I set that thought aside and went on. "Until it's safe." Which might be never. But there was nothing I could do about that, so I pushed on.

"While I know this isn't something any of us want to discuss, we need to face the possibility that the ISA might win the war, but Deborah and I might not come back." My wife moved her hand to cover mine and sent me a small wave of love and confidence through the contact.

Marcus and Mattie both tried to speak at once, but I waved them to silence. "We have every intention of beating the shit out of the Drakh and their allies, but we all know that people die in battles, and it would be irresponsible of us as parents if we didn't make appropriate provision for that possibility."

I pulled a data crystal from my robes and passed it to Marcus. "This holds all the details of our wills, all our financial records, and what you need to do if we don't come back. The executors for both wills are a firm of lawyers on Mars called the Magnusson Partnership. One of the partners will look after you if needed, although it's entirely possible that old Bjorn Magnusson himself may come out of retirement to celebrate the news of my death. The old bastard never forgave me for winning a bet against him, but he's honest-at least where money is concerned-so you can trust him."

I lifted Deborah's hand and kissed her fingers, remembering the time over twenty years before when Magnusson had tried to take my wife away from me and had failed miserably. It's a memory I still savor.

"Any questions?" I looked around the table at the next two generations of my family and sent a silent prayer to the ancient Vorlon god Booji-with or without bucket-that they would be safe and I would come back to live out my life watching them grow into the amazing people I knew they would become. They were pretty remarkable already, and I was sure they'd only get better with age.

The young people were all silent and Jean-Luc slept on, so I lifted myself to my feet, still holding Deborah's hand and said, "Then it's time we got going. Angel, Jack and Vya are waiting for us on Prime."

There were lots of hugs but no tears before we parted. I think I was the one nearest to breaking down as my children seemed to have inherited their mother's ability to hide their feelings behind an impassive façade, whereas my poker face tends to crumble when family are involved. But I stiffened my upper lip like the true Brit I'm not, bade my children and grandson farewell-as well as Oscar. I

couldn't leave without a quick pat for my dog. OK, I know that technically he's not my dog-and left the house.

At the bottom of the porch steps, I went to mount my motorbike to ride down to the landing field and discovered that the robes of the Entil'Zha really don't work well on a bike. I couldn't help laughing as I bundled up the skirts of my cloak and climbed aboard. Hardly the most heroic of departures. Deborah swung her leg over the bike to mount behind me, then pulled herself close to me, her arms wrapped around my waist, holding the voluminous material tightly.

She was chuckling as she said, "We don't want you getting your skirts caught in the wheels, do we? Isadora Duncan died when her scarf caught in the wheels of a car, but you're not half the dancer she was, so best avoid comparisons."

I snorted with laughter, started the bike and roared away across the Ranger compound towards the final confrontation of the forces of light and darkness.

Connor Black

Boyle came back sooner than I'd expected. He'd left on the previous Friday evening, but it was now Monday morning and he was back. He'd called from his ship and I'd told him to bring it down to the landing pad behind my house. So I sat on the swing on my porch, enjoying the morning air, waiting to find out what the problem was. Because I knew there was a problem or Boyle wouldn't have been back so soon.

There was no way he could have delivered the cargo he'd been carrying when he left, unloaded, and got back to Draxis in so short a time. So something had happened to make him turn around; that would cost him on penalty charges, and Boyle wasn't a man to incur penalties needlessly.

I watched as the ship landed-it was a tight squeeze but Boyle's pilot was good-and as Boyle disembarked. His head was down and his fists were clenched as he walked, but there was nothing unusual about that. He always looked like he'd prefer to walk through doors rather than opening them. A bull in a china shop has nothing on Jonah Boyle.

He looked up as he arrived at the steps leading up to the porch and scowled at me. "You're costing me money, Black. I'd better get compensated or there'll be trouble." He was trying to put on a good show but his face was drawn and deathly pale. He looked like he'd aged ten years over the weekend since I'd seen him.

I raised an eyebrow but remained seated on the swing. "Not my problem, Boyle. You'd better take that up with whoever sent you back here." I pointed to a chair positioned next to me and Jonah mounted the steps then sat heavily, slumping back into his seat with a deep sigh.

He rubbed at his forehead and looked tired to death. "How did you know I'd been sent back?" I sometimes wonder about Boyle. He really isn't very bright. Or maybe it was just the killer headache which he gave every sign of suffering.

"You just told me. So who sent you?" This was going to be the interesting bit.



Boyle shrugged. "The message came from high up in the Raiders, but my guess is it comes from either the Drakh or the Frell. Does it matter?"

I nodded. "Sure it does. Who sent the message will tell me whether to take any notice of it or not. Or whether I should just shoot the messenger."

I didn't move a muscle but Boyle still flinched and his face screwed up as he whined, "Don't be like that, Connor. I've always played fair by you, haven't I?"

That made me laugh out loud. "Only when you think you've no alternative, Jonah. But before you give me the message, who the hell are the Frell? I thought I'd heard of most of the aliens in this part of the galaxy but that's a new name to me."

Boyle nodded. "They're new to everyone, except maybe the Drakh, and I tell you Connor, they make the Drakh look like pushovers. These are the guys who came through that rift in Sector 14 and they're seriously nasty pieces of work. They only have a handful of ships, but even the Drakh are polite to them, and you know how rare that is."

I couldn't help but smile. I'd had to teach a Drakh to watch his manners around me and if the Frell had done the same, then these new guys needed to be taken seriously. "So what's the message?"

Boyle was fidgeting around in his chair, making it creak. I don't think I've ever seen him look so nervous and uncomfortable. He started by answering my question with a question of his own. "Have you heard about this big battle that's coming up at Coriana VI?"

I nodded. I have my own sources of information, and there'd been rumors floating around for weeks. That morning I'd got the news that the ISA were moving all their forces-White Star fleet, home fleets, nearly everything they had-to Coriana VI to face off against the combined forces of the Drakh, the Frell-as I now knew them to be called-and whichever of the Raiders could be coerced into fighting with them.

Raiders don't generally go in for set battles. They prefer to wait until the odds are in their favor then strike and run away, which makes them not entirely stupid in my eyes. I waited for Boyle to continue.

"The Drakh and the Frell are pretty confident that they can destroy the ISA fleet. But they're worried that the Rangers have a secret weapon. Something called 'the merge'. It's been used against the Drakh before and they've always lost to it. So when I mentioned that I'd heard you tell that Ranger something about this 'merge', they got really interested. Interested enough so they called in a telepath and pulled my brain apart until they'd replayed every second of that interrogation in my cargo hold."

Well, that explained the headache. Boyle rubbed his head then shook it. I could see the pain on his face and how he was haunted by the memory of what the telepath had done to him. Tough shit. "Your own fault, Boyle, You shouldn't have flapped your mouth."

Jonah shrugged. "20/20 hindsight. At least I got to walk away with my brains more or less intact, which is more than most can say after they've been reamed out by a telepath. But they've left me with a headache that won't quit. I'm told it could be weeks before it eases off."

He was going to be sorely disappointed if he expected sympathy from me. Boyle rubbed his forehead again, took a deep breath and went on. "Anyway, the message is that you're to come with me. The Drakh and the Frell want to know everything that you know about this 'merge'. And the Drakh reckon you've got something of your own that might help control or defeat it. Don't ask me what they think you've got, 'cos I don't have a clue, but whatever it is, they want it and they want you."

I was still leaning back on the swing, my hands resting along the back, completely relaxed-or at least giving that appearance. "And what if I say no? What if I tell them to take a hike? I'm pretty comfortable here, Boyle. I don't see any good reason to join those ugly sons of bitches in a battle with the ISA."

Boyle winced but gave a hollow laugh. "I'm with you on ugly. But they were pretty clear on what happens if you don't come with me, Connor. They think they're going to win this battle and if they do they'll have all the resources of the ISA at their disposal. They won't need Draxis and they won't need you. So they'll come back here and blow this planet to pieces. And even if they lose, they say they'll make sure that one ship is left to come back here and finish you off. Your defenses are useless if they don't care about destroying your colony and the mines. That's what they told me to tell you. It's their message, not mine, Black, so don't shoot the messenger."

I kept my face expressionless, but I knew I was in trouble. My threat to destroy the mines only worked if the Drakh and their allies wanted the minerals. If they didn't care, then that ace in the hole was worthless. But I never kept just one card up my sleeve.

Jonah didn't know about the Rage. And the Drakh had only got a brief taste of it. Not enough to know its true power. But the short encounter had obviously been enough to intrigue the Drakh and to make them want me on their side, as well as wanting the knowledge I had about the sisters and their abilities. The Rage and that knowledge put me in a good negotiating position, but Boyle was not the man I needed to negotiate with. I needed to talk to the puppet masters, not the puppet.

There was just one thing I needed from Boyle. I stood up and said, "Keep your shirt on, Jonah. It's no big deal. I'd like to meet these Frell anyway. But there is one condition. I don't trust these bastards not to come round here and blow my colony apart while I'm gone. Now I don't care about most of it, but if I'm coming with you, then I'm bringing Gabe with me. I'm not leaving my son as a sitting duck for Drakh fighters."

Boyle frowned as he looked up at me. "Are you sure you want to do that, Connor? He might be safer here than where you're going. Or I could take him with me and keep him safe."

That suggestion merited a loud laugh. "You want me to trust you with my son? Jonah, I wouldn't trust you with my gerbil, and I hate rodents."

I turned and started to walk away, saying over my shoulder. "Give me half an hour to make arrangements then we'll come down." I paused and turned, grinning at the Raider. "That will give you time to clear out of the best quarters you have on your ship and get them ready for me and Gabe." Then I stalked into the house.

You're probably wondering why I was so keen to take my son with me on what could potentially be a very dangerous journey. It wasn't the reason I'd given Boyle. The true reason was that I had no

choice. The Rage wouldn't let me leave him behind. If anything happened to me, the Rage wanted to be sure that my heir was close by so it could move on to its new host. I'd no idea what might happen if I were to die when I was light years away from Gabe. The Rage wasn't risking it. If I went with Boyle, then Gabe had to go, too.

It hadn't been an issue when Gabriel was on Earth as he wasn't old enough then to take over as my heir. He still wasn't old enough really and I'd seen what could happen when the Rage moved into a host who wasn't ready for it. My first son, Caleb, had gotten completely out of control when I'd 'died' briefly back in the 20th century, as he hadn't been old enough to manage the emotions the Rage poured into him. Gabe was older now than Caleb had been then, but he still needed a few more years before he would come into his own. That meant a few more years of life for me, if I could avoid getting killed some other way in the meantime.

It was a tough choice, trying to decide if staying on Draxis was more or less dangerous than joining the Drakh/Frell fleet-damned if you do and damned if you don't-but it seemed the Rage felt more secure if it had Gabriel close by. And what the Rage wanted, the Rage got.

School vacation had started the previous week so I knew Gabe was in the house. His friends, Booth and Nelly, had come over earlier, clearing every scrap of food from the breakfast table before retreating to Gabe's room. Racing up the stairs I threw the door to the bedroom open and couldn't help grinning at the sight that met my eyes.

Nelly No-Knickers was spread-eagled on Gabe's bed, living up to her nickname, stark naked. Gabe and his best friend, Booth, were both stooped over, looking between her legs, and Gabe was just reaching out to touch what was displayed for his attention. He froze in place and turned to look at me, guilt written all over his face.

"You might not want to touch that, Gabe, you don't know where it's been." Gabe and Booth shot backwards across the room, leaving Nelly naked on the bed. She tried to cover herself with her hands, so I threw her the dress that she'd left on the floor. "Cover yourself up, darlin'. These two ain't old enough to know what to do with what you're offering. Go find yourself someone else to service your needs."

Nelly scooted off the bed, pulling her dress over her head and then looked up at me lasciviously. "You could help me out with that, Mr. Black."

I laughed at her, saying, "I prefer my women to have some curves. Come back in a few years if you grow what you need to suit me." She hissed at me and fled the room.

Booth and Gabe were still backed against the wall, looking guilty as hell and nervous with it. Booth whined, "You won't tell my Pa, will you, Mr. Black? He'd take a belt to me if he found out."

I laughed again. "Maybe you deserve the belt, Booth. Not for poking around Miss Nelly-that's just natural for a boy your age-but for getting caught doing it. Now git, before I change my mind and call your Daddy."

Booth shot out of the room like the hounds of hell were on his tail and I turned my attention to my son. Gabriel was trying to look unconcerned, but he knew he'd broken one of my cardinal rules.

Don't get caught. But I didn't have time to work on his education just then.

"Grab a bag and throw in whatever clothes and other stuff you need for a few days. We're going on a trip."

Gabe looked surprised. "Where are we going? You didn't say nothing before."

I turned to his wardrobe and started grabbing random items of clothing, throwing them at him as I said, "This has come up unexpectedly. Now get packing."

I left the room and went to my own bedroom, packing a few essentials for myself before going downstairs and telling Anna that me and Gabe were going away for a while. Then I went outside to where Gabe and Boyle were waiting for me. We walked across the lawn to Boyle's ship and boarded. I wondered when or if I'd return to Draxis, and suddenly thought about the Ranger I still had locked up in the Sheriff's station. Oh well, he'd just have to wait until I got back.

Angelique Gideon

I sat on the bed of the quarters Jack and I had been given on White Star Prime and shivered. Since boarding the ship I'd felt uneasy. I'd never been on a White Star before and something about it was unnerving me. It felt more alien than any other ship I'd been on.



I knew the White Stars were built from joint Minbari/Vorlon technology and I wondered if it was the Vorlon element that made me feel so uncomfortable. Yet the Excalibur had been built from the same technology and I'd never felt this discomfort there. Were the White Stars somehow different? More Vorlon perhaps? Or perhaps the difference was that the Excalibur had been built by Earth while the Minbari had always constructed the

White Stars.

Whatever the reason, I couldn't help but wonder how Demon coped when she was on board. Surely the constant reminder of the Vorlon presence on these ships was equally disconcerting for her? Didn't it bring back memories of when she'd carried a part of a Vorlon within her? If so, she'd never mentioned it. If she'd been affected, she was probably doing a typical Demon thing-stiff upper lip, British to the core, not showing any emotion. Sometimes her stoicism makes me want to slap her, just to get a reaction!

Jack had gone to the bridge of the White Star to see Matt and although he'd asked me to join him, I'd told him I'd rather stay in our quarters and unpack the few things we'd brought with us. I was now wondering if I'd made the wrong decision. Perhaps I'd feel better if I had company.

"Don't be so silly, it's just a ship!" I spoke out loud to myself, gave myself a shake and stood. It didn't take long to put away the simple changes of clothes we'd brought aboard. Then I sat down on the bed again, silently thanking Demon for ensuring we got quarters with a human bed, rather than one of those ridiculous Minbari slanting things which were inclined to tip you out in the middle of the night if you moved.

I say I was thanking Demon because I was damned sure that if Matt had had anything to do with the allocation of quarters, Jack and I would have ended up somewhere that was pure Minbari. After a few moments of sitting in silence I began to brood again; a bad habit I seem to have developed recently.

The previous evening had been almost overwhelming. First, to find that Demon and I could now link with Vya, who could take Ilas' place in the merge if needed. That opened up possibilities that had been closed to us since Ilas had died. But it made me wonder, did I really need the merge anymore? I'd needed it in the skies above Nabula, when I'd destroyed the Nabulan fleet as well as the Shadow Hybrid ship, but was it still necessary? In the seven years that had passed since then, I'd come a long way, and under Alwyn's guidance I'd grown in both power and control.

I told myself not to be so arrogant. The merge gave me access to powers I didn't possess myself. Demon's empathy allowed me to sense other beings, to know if they were friend or foe, and to pinpoint their location. Lily's telepathic block prevented mental attacks, while her prescience allowed me to see microseconds into the future, fending off physical attacks almost before they were made. And Vya's shape shifting enabled me to form my powers and use them most effectively against my enemies. Yes, I could probably obliterate anything that stood in my path using my own telekinetic abilities, but the merge helped me do so far more efficiently.

So if the forces of light needed it, the merge was once again available for defense and attack, and I would lead that merge, retaining the memories of our actions. Demon had once been our director, but since my powers had grown and hers had diminished, I'd taken on that role. There were times when I wished my sister still shouldered that burden, but she'd shielded me and my other sisters from the consequences of our actions for long enough. Now it was my turn to carry the load.

After we'd successfully linked with my nephew, Matt, Demon and Vya had headed for home, leaving me and Jack with Alwyn and the Technomages. We'd accompanied the Mages back to the quarters they'd been given by the Rangers to check out how they were settling in. While comfortable, their rooms were not luxurious by any means, being the standard Ranger quarters.

Consisting of individual lodgings, with living and sleeping quarters combined, alongside small shower rooms and tiny kitchens, those quarters weren't really suitable for family life. However, everyone hoped they wouldn't need to be there for long, and the Mages and their families all looked forward to being able to return to their home planet once the current crisis was over. They'd been in exile for over thirty years and they were longing to go home.

The Technomages had refused to travel on board any of the White Stars that were leaving Minbar for Coriana VI. That made me wonder if they too had an aversion to the Vorlon technology used to build the Ranger fleet. The Mages planned to travel in their own ships, led by Alwyn and Sarah, to join the forces that were being gathered for the battle ahead. Once they arrived at Coriana VI the Mages would transfer to the Excalibur, where Demon, Vya and I would join them.

After leaving the Technomages, Jack and I had gone over to Alwyn's ship for a nightcap, and Sarah had joined us, along with their son, Jaysen. Jaysen had been having a mild sulk because he was being left behind on Minbar while his parents joined the fleet at Coriana VI. I couldn't help but smile at this as I knew that Demon's son, Marcus, was also not happy about being left behind. No doubt the two young men would enjoy grouching to each other about how unreasonable their parents were.

Sarah had then told us that a rogue Mage, Brant, was drugged and confined to a spare cabin on board their ship. She'd held a brandy glass and rolled the golden liquid around inside as she'd said, "He's still unconscious and will remain that way until we deliver him to the Mages in the morning. His room is locked, but Ishtar is guarding him, just in case."

I wondered what she meant by him being 'delivered' but before I could ask, Alwyn had nodded and leaned forward in his chair, looking deep into the glass of whisky he held in front of him and said, "Ishtar will let me know if there is any problem. I can't say I'm looking forward to what must be done to him, but he has brought it on himself."

My curiosity had been too much, so I'd had to ask, "Who is Brant and why do you have him locked up?" Alwyn had looked at me sadly, then explained that they'd found a Keeper attached to the Mage and that they'd captured him. He also told us what was planned for the following day.

At that point, I'd wanted to teleport myself far from Alwyn's ship, far from the Ranger compound, hell, far from the whole planet Minbar! Having a Keeper attached to me on Centauri Prime was by far the worst thing that had ever happened to me in my whole life.

Worse than losing my mother, worse than being kidnapped-first by the Vorlons and then by Lucas-worse than being beaten nearly to death by Smith, having to leave my sisters on Eriadne, losing Nikarran on Mars, nearly starving to death there, being imprisoned and charged with murder-worse even than being forced to abandon my son; none of those things had been as bad as when I'd been controlled by the Keeper.

Seeing and hearing everything, feeling everything, but having to watch and listen while my own body was completely controlled by that alien monster; nothing could be worse. Yet Brant had been a willing host to the Keeper. How anyone could agree to that was beyond my comprehension.

I'd felt Jack's arm encircling me, holding me tightly against him as he'd whispered gently to me that I was safe now, that he would never let anything bad happen to me again, and slowly his words and the feel of his body next to mine had relaxed me enough so that I hadn't run screaming from the room. But knowing that there was a Keeper on board Alwyn's ship made it a close thing.

I'd asked Alwyn how they could prevent the Drakh who had spawned the Keeper and who was therefore still in telepathic contact with it from finding out that the Keeper had been discovered.

"We cannot prevent the Drakh Master from knowing that his Keeper has been destroyed. But we can conceal how it happened and who is responsible. All the Drakh Master will know is that his creature is no longer in contact."

After that we'd talked late into the night about the Shadows, the Technomages and the source of my powers. I'd told my husband years before about how I was the product of a Shadow breeding experiment that had been subverted by the Vorlons. How every generation of women in my family for seven generations before me had been abducted by the Shadows and integrated into one of their ships.

When Alwyn had first told me about this-back on Eriadne at the time of our wedding-I hadn't appreciated exactly what it meant. That had changed in the skies above Nabula when the merge had encountered the Shadow Hybrid ship, with its human telepath at its core. That poor creature had been driven completely insane by her experiences, to the point where her only joy was in destruction. I could only wonder if my mother, and all her ancestors before her, had shared in that madness.

Most of my memories of my mother are wonderful, but I also recall those times when she'd been sick. Not the sickness that eventually killed her, but a mental illness. She would have times when she'd withdraw from the world, hiding in whatever home we had at the time, whispering about how the stars hurt so much, but how death would make the pain go away.

I didn't understand her words then; they'd just frightened me. I'd thought they were part of her illness, and that illness always passed, so I'd pushed the memories aside and just got on with living. That had often been hard enough without dwelling on my mother's 'bad spells'. Now I understood that she'd been remembering the time of her abduction, remembering what had been done to her. But the Shadows hadn't been able to destroy her completely. Somehow she'd survived to become the mother who'd loved me, who'd laughed and cried with me, and whom I still remembered with equal love and sorrow.

It had been growing light when Jack and I finally left Alwyn's ship and returned to Serenity. We'd gone back to our quarters but we hadn't slept. We'd made love, again and again, holding each other close, needing the comfort of being physically joined, needing the love we shared to ward off the shadows that seemed to be building around us. We'd moved to our bathtub and made love again, enjoying the warmth of the water as well as the heat of our passion.

We'd both been tired and sore when we finally left Serenity and made our way to White Star Prime, but we knew that we would have plenty of time to sleep once the voyage to Coriana VI got underway.

Jack had wanted us to travel on Serenity of course, but Matt had refused him permission to bring our ship into a combat zone, telling him that a battlefield was no place for a civilian ship, even one as well-armed as Serenity. He'd told Jack in no uncertain terms that the Excalibur would not be able to protect Serenity in the way she had when we were stationed at the rift in Sector 14. The battle at Coriana VI would be far worse than anything any of us had ever seen before.

That was the thought that made me shiver again as I sat on the bed in our quarters on White Star Prime. For the first time in my life I was going into battle knowing what lay ahead. Every time the merge had fought before it had been in response to an attack on us and on the people we loved. The merge had always been initiated as a defensive action. This time would be different. This time we were approaching a battlefield knowing full well that we may have to fight.

I knew Matt didn't want to use the merge. I knew he only planned to have us there as back up, in case something went horribly wrong. I knew that he had every intention of defeating the enemies he faced without calling on my powers and those of my sisters. But deep down I knew we were going to have to fight. I knew that in the near future I would be called upon to kill for the forces of light.

My biggest concern was whether I would be able to stop killing once I started. Alwyn had taught me ways to control my powers over the years, but after Nabula I was scared that I could lose control. At Nabula, all it had taken was one fleeting thought of vengeance from Matt, and I'd led the merge to wipe out the Nabulan fleet. Not just to destroy them but to obliterate them until only atoms remained.

Ever since then I'd feared my powers, feared the pent up violence within me. I'd never admitted, even to Jack, the extent of my fears. I'd never told him how I feared my abilities could so easily be diverted to darkness. My power came from the Shadows. Could I be sure that I would remain their enemy? Could I hold myself back from the joy of destruction?

My main hope was that the merge could save me from myself. That the love of my sisters for their partners, their children and everything that was light and good could keep me from descending into darkness. But sometimes I wondered if there was anything that could lead me away from the light and into the shadows, turning my back on my sisters and their families.

And what made me most afraid was the thought that there was indeed something that could tempt me to betray my friends, my family and the forces of light. I could only hope that such temptation would not be put in my path. Or if it were, I hoped that my love for Jack, and his love for me, could keep me from the shadows.

The doors to the cabin slid apart and Jack entered. I jumped to my feet and threw myself into his arms, sobbing on his shoulder. He didn't speak, he didn't ask me what was wrong, he just gave me what I needed most at that moment; his love.

Connor Black

Having thought about the Ranger I'd locked up on Draxis, the first thing I asked when I boarded Boyle's ship was, "Where have you got that Ranger stowed?"

Boyle shrugged. "Air costs money, Black. He wasn't earning his keep so we tossed him out of the airlock."

I rounded on the idiot and grabbed him by the throat, tightening my grip as I lifted him off the deck. I could see he was stunned by the strength I showed, but he didn't know it was the Rage that drove me, the Rage that gave me the strength to easily lift him from his feet.

As I held him dangling, I hissed at him, "Just what kind of moron are you, Boyle? I give you a bargaining chip and you throw it away. You waste chances, you waste assets, you



waste..." I couldn't find the words to express my contempt for the Raider, so just casually threw him across the cargo hold and watched him land on his back, sprawled against the doors.

By this time the ship had lifted off and before Boyle could move, I jumped across the deck to stand by the door controls. Boyle's eyes opened wide as he realized what I was about to do. "You're a waste of space. Goodbye, Jonah. This should fix your headache." And I hit the opening control.

The doors yawned wide and a rush of air swept the Raider out. We were still within the atmosphere, so I knew he wouldn't suffocate, but we were a hell of a long way up. It would take him a long time to fall and in that time he could ponder on the wisdom of getting on my bad side.

I hit the control to close the doors and looked across the cargo bay to where Gabe was standing, clutching one of the pillars that supported the ceiling-the very one we'd had Marcus Cole tied up to- looking at me in shock. My son had never seen me kill before.

I nodded at him and said, "Watch and learn, Gabe. Don't waste assets. You never know when they might come in useful."

Gabe nodded, his face still white with shock. "Wasn't Boyle an asset?"

I shook my head. "Not any more. There are times when stupidity is a capital offence. This was one of those times. Now let's go tell his crew about the terrible accident Jonah had when he stumbled against the door control after we took off."

Gabe's color was returning and he grinned up at me. "Oh, it was an accident, of course. An *accident* accident."

I laughed and tousled his hair, proud that my boy learned so quickly.

Breaking the bad news didn't take long and the crew didn't appear to be too distraught about Boyle's tragic loss. The first mate immediately started giving orders, but from the looks he was getting from the pilot and navigator, there could be interesting times ahead for the ship. Not my problem. Boyle's ship was only taking me as far as a rendezvous with a larger Raider, which would take Gabe and me to Coriana VI.

We transferred to the Circe around twenty hours after we left Draxis. The Circe was a much bigger ship than Boyle's, with bigger engines; big enough to be able to open its own jump point. Those ships were rare amongst the Raiders and I was keen to meet the Captain, who was taking us on to the meeting with the Drakh and the Frell.

His name was Olumide Afolayan, which he later told me meant 'God has come' and 'walks like a rich man'. As far as I could see he walked like the giant he was, easily two meters tall, and I learned later that as far as his crew was concerned, he was indeed a God come amongst them. His skin was that shade of black which is almost purple, his eyes blacker than his skin and his teeth a startling white as he gave me and Gabe a shark-like grin.

"Welcome aboard the Circe, Mr. Black. Now do tell me about this *accident* Jonah Boyle had on his way here." His grin told me he knew exactly what had happened to Boyle, and it didn't bother him one little bit.

I allowed him to send Gabe off to a cabin, all the time keeping my senses wide open, making sure I kept mental track of my son. If anyone tried to harm him in any way, I would know instantly and so would the Rage. I'm not a telepath as such-although I can read minds if I actually make contact with another person-but I can always sense the presence of people close to me. And no one is closer to me than my son, so I keep mental tabs on him.

I stayed with Afolayan as he used his commlink to give orders to his crew to ready the ship for the jump into hyperspace and then we went to his quarters. These were large and luxurious, with dark red velvet drapes covering the bulkheads, deep, dark seating scattered with cushions and soft, multi-colored rugs on the floor. The room had a surprisingly feminine feel to it. The Captain gestured me to a comfortable chair and produced a bottle of malt whiskey, which he opened, pouring generous measures for us both.

Once we'd tasted and savored the liquor, he leaned back in his chair and gave me one of his stellar smiles. "The Drakh are paying me generously to carry you to them, Mr. Black. I'm intrigued. I've heard a lot about you, but I have to admit I'm surprised that you're working with them. Why is that?"

I shrugged and saw no reason to lie. "Not much choice really. If I'd refused, they'd have wiped out my colony and me along with it. So for the moment, I'm playing ball. What about you? Why are you helping these aliens who want to wipe out humanity?"

Afolayan grinned again. "Like you, not much choice. The ISA have a long list of things they'd like to discuss with me, and death of personality would be the least they'd want to do to me if they caught me. The Centauri in particular would be much more creative about their sentencing. The Drakh pay well, but I can't say I enjoy working with them. Personally I'd like it best if the Drakh and the ISA just fought each other to a standstill and left the rest of us to get on with our lives."

I lifted my glass and toasted him "Amen to that."

The Captain laughed. "Well, that explains why you're willing to go to them, but not why they want you. What is it that makes you so special to them?"

I gave him a twisted smile. "Now that would be telling. Maybe we'll just say I have some special talents." But just for good measure I used one of those talents to throw one of the cushions from a seat nearby right across the room.

*Afolayan's eyes widened. "A Teek? Now that *is* special. But how would that be useful to them now?"*

I smiled again. "That's just one of my talents, Captain. I'm far too modest to boast about the rest."

That earned me a grin and another slug of Scotch. I then said, "So tell me about the Frell. They came through the rift in Sector 14, is that right?"

Afolayan nodded. "I don't know how many of them got through, but they're evil bastards. Big-bigger than me-and as white as I'm black. I don't mean white like you're white, I mean really white. They look like they died a few days back and are just about to start rotting. They also have a weird smell to them, sort of like lilacs, which is off-putting. And they're mean. Really mean. They kill for fun

and they prefer to kill slowly. They actually make the Drakh look soft. Don't mess with those guys, Black."

I nodded, grateful for the information and the advice. "So why don't we have any of them in our universe? I thought the rift gave access to a parallel space."

The Captain nodded back. "That's what I heard, too. A place which is mostly the same but with some odd differences. Well, one of those differences is the Frell. In this universe they were wiped out in the last Shadow War, a thousand years ago. Completely gone. But over there, one ship survived. They only had a small crew, and they were all male, so they couldn't reproduce. So they started cloning themselves. All the Frell are now clones from those original few survivors. And they hate the Minbari just about as much as the Drakh hate humans. They blame the Minbari for having wiped them out over here and nearly doing the same over there. So when they got over here, they were natural allies for the Drakh."

That made sense and explained why I'd never heard of these new invaders. I couldn't help but smile to myself. If they'd had no women and had been reproducing by cloning for a thousand years it was no wonder they were bad tempered.

We kept talking for an hour or so, until three women entered the room carrying trays of food and drink. Two of them settled themselves either side of the Captain while the third came over to tend to my needs. All three were worth looking at; a blonde, a redhead and a tiny oriental girl. The redhead was apparently mine for the rest of my stay, if I wanted her. None of them was a match to...

Never mind.

By the time I left to go to the cabin Afolayan had set aside for me, all three of the women came with me, and they brought what remained of the whiskey with them.

When I woke about ten hours after retiring to my cabin I was interested to note that there was a woman sleeping on either side of me. One was a brunette while the other was nearly as black as the Captain. I can't say I remember much about the other three leaving or those two arriving, but being the gentleman I am, I decided it would be impolite to disappoint them. So I set to, servicing their needs as well as my own.

I was just relaxing in the aftermath when the doors to my cabin opened and my son walked in, carrying a tray of food and drink. I could smell the fresh ground coffee across the room, so I chased the women out, quickly used the bath room and dressed, before joining Gabe at the table. He'd uncovered two plates, both piled high with pancakes, bacon and maple syrup.

I decided that I'd happily travel on the Circe any time I was invited by its Captain, then set to, clearing my plate in minutes. I was sitting back, savoring the coffee, when Gabe finally spoke. "I thought you said I shouldn't touch things if I didn't know where they'd been. Did you know where they'd been?" He gestured with his thumb towards the door where the women had exited.

"Do as I say, not as I do, Gabe. One day you'll know enough to make up your own rules, but for now, your father knows best."

Gabe digested this and nodded. "OK. How much longer until we get where we're going?"

"Good question. Let's go find out."



So we made our way to the bridge of the Circe, where we found Captain Afolayan sitting in a large central chair, giving his orders to a crew of five women. Not the same five I'd seen the previous night. A completely different set. I wondered if Afolayan had any male crew members and decided I didn't really care.

The Captain turned as we entered and gave me one of his shark-like grins. He pointed at the viewscreen at the front of the bridge, through which we could see that we had dropped out of hyperspace and were approaching a Drakh destroyer. A small shuttle was just leaving the larger ship and was heading towards us.

"Good timing. The Drakh and Frell ambassadors are on their way over to see you, Mr. Black. I trust you're fully rested and ready for action?"

I bowed my head in acknowledgement. "Your hospitality is first class, Captain. The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast."

Afolayan bellowed a laugh then stood abruptly. "Follow me. I've set aside a room for your meeting. Do you want your son with you, or shall I take care of him while you're busy?"

Strangely, although I'd known the Captain for less than a day, I trusted him. More importantly, the Rage trusted him. I turned to Gabe and said, "Stay with Captain Afolayan until I've finished my meeting. This shouldn't take long."

Well, I hoped it wouldn't and as it turned out, it didn't. I'm sure I've had less pleasant meetings in my life, but I can't honestly recall when. I told them what I knew about the merge, and about Angel and her powers. I also told them how the merge would be significantly weakened with the loss of the shape shifter. I told them there was a good chance that I could block the merge in the same way I'd blocked Angel's powers when we'd been together.

They wanted to know if Gabe had inherited his mother's powers and I told them he was too young for us to be able to tell as yet. Those powers would only display themselves when he was older. They would have liked to check my answers by telepathic means, but the Rage soon saw off the telepath they'd brought over with them. They had to carry that guy out; he was unconscious and drooling by the time the Rage had finished with him.

Before they left they told me they expected the remainder of their forces to join them within the following two days. So we had forty-eight hours in which to enjoy Captain Afolayan's hospitality and that of his all-female crew, before the start of the war. Those days were among the best of my life.

30th July 2291

Deborah Gideon

In the years since Matthew had become Entil'Zha, I'd never let him know just how much I hated having to travel on a White Star. To me, the ships reeked of Vorlons. They made me feel jittery in a way that the Excalibur never had. I can't explain the difference, but just being on a White Star left me feeling constantly on edge. So the trip from Minbar was not comfortable.

When I met up with Angel, I realized she was feeling exactly the same about the ship. She clung to Jack for comfort whenever she could, but unfortunately he couldn't spend all his time with her as he had a job to do.

Matthew and I knew before we left Minbar that we'd be working non-stop during the trip. It would have been far worse had Delenn not spent weeks beforehand preparing the ISA members for the fact that a war was coming and that the ISA would need their fleets in the battles ahead. That meant that when the news had come through that the Drakh and their allies were congregating at Coriana VI, the ISA was at least ready to start moving their ships. But exactly where to move them and when was still a huge logistical task, and the job fell to Matthew to complete, as Delenn had appointed the Entil'Zha as Fleet Admiral for the ISA forces.

That meant we had three days in which to organize the fleets for the battle ahead; fleets from the Minbari, Narn, Centauri, Earth Alliance and all the other members of the ISA, as well as the Ranger fleet. They all had to be given orders to get into the appropriate places before the battle began. And of course all those ISA members wanted to discuss their positions-and in some cases argue that they would be better placed elsewhere-with the Entil'Zha. Personally.

I'm not sure we could have completed all the organizational work that was needed if we hadn't had Jack's help. That, and some typical Gideon sneaky double-dealing. All in a good cause of course. Because Jack's help involved a little deception that we hoped the ISA would never hear about. Matthew had seen that things would get hectic as soon as he'd heard from Alwyn, so he'd got on the comm to Jack immediately, with a single request.

Stop shaving.

After some initial grumbling, Jack had agreed and by the time we set off from Minbar, he was sprouting a healthy stubble, much to Angel's annoyance. Matthew cut his beard back until it was barely more than a five o'clock shadow, so he and Jack were almost indistinguishable. I can't say I was very happy about the change. When Matthew's beard is longer, the hair is quite soft and feels rather nice. At this length it was rough and wiry. Stubble rash is bad enough when it affects your face. There are other parts of the anatomy where it's even more uncomfortable!

Once we were aboard White Star Prime, Matthew and Jack split the work necessary to move the ISA fleets between them. Matthew worked with me on coordinating the movements of the Rangers' ships as well as the four largest ISA fleets: Minbari, Earth Alliance, Narn and Centauri. Jack and Trulann worked with all the other ISA members: Drazi, Brakiri, Pak'ma'ra, Llort, Hiaych, Hurr, Gaim, Vree and so on. Each of these races had fewer ships to bring to the battle, but there were far more of them. So the work was split pretty evenly.

Matthew worked from the bridge while Jack and Trulann worked in the large map room that had been specially installed on Prime. I knew my husband would have preferred to use the large map table rather than the smaller one on the bridge, but he'd had to admit that Jack needed it more than

he did. Matthew had only five fleets to organize while Jack had over a dozen. If Jack hadn't helped out, I don't think Matthew and I would have got any rest at all in the three days it took for us to arrive at Beta Durani.

Matthew had decided to use that star system, which had previously held an Earth Alliance colony and an Earthforce military base, as a staging post to assemble his fleets. It was close enough to Coriana VI to make the jump time only minutes, but far enough away so that the fleets could assemble outside the range of the Drakh sensors.

Jack's impersonation of my husband was just about perfect, even down to complaining constantly about the discomfort of the spare Entil'Zha's uniform Matthew had loaned him. Angel gave her husband about as much sympathy on that front as I gave Matthew i.e. none. I'm sure I heard the phrase 'just suck it up and stop whining' come from my sister's lips at least once.

Angel was, of course, NOT happy about the hours her husband spent working, rather than sharing their cabin with her. I'm sure I caught a shy smile on Matthew's face when he heard about her complaints, but perhaps I'm being uncharitable. Then again, perhaps not. Neither was my sister any more enthusiastic than I was about the feel of a bristly cheek against... well, against wherever Jack put his face.

Jack's help meant that Matthew and I did at least get to spend a few hours each day together in private. We spent those hours sleeping a little and making love a lot. And I do mean a lot. Even more than we usually did.

I was desperate to have Matthew inside me, touching me, holding me for every moment I could. I knew that when we arrived at Beta Durani I would have to transfer to the Excalibur and Matthew would stay behind on White Star Prime. The thought of having to leave him, having to say good bye, knowing that I might never see him again, left me distraught.

I tried to hide my distress, but Matthew knows me too well. And I could sense his feelings echoing mine. I knew that our parting was going to be as difficult for him as it was for me. So we spent every moment of the three days between leaving Minbar and arriving at Beta Durani together. Together on the bridge or together in our cabin. And when we were alone we ripped the clothes off each other and locked ourselves together in a passionate love-making that transcended anything we had ever achieved before.

We spent hours touching and caressing, holding and stroking, without ever needing to climax. Just being as close as we could possibly be, physically and emotionally, was all we needed. But when we did finally rise to orgasm it was like nothing we'd ever experienced before. My sendings were so strong that Angel told me later they were felt-albeit at a very low level-throughout the ship, despite the shielding surrounding our cabin. I didn't know I still had that strength, but my desperation at the thought of leaving Matthew drove me to new heights.

But finally we had to untangle ourselves, dress and return to the bridge, where Matthew oversaw the final jump into Beta Durani space, all the while holding my hand tightly. It took all the control I possessed to stand quietly at my husband's side when the roiling red of hyperspace finally gave way to the black of normal space.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw myself at Matthew and beg him to take us away from there. Take us anywhere in the universe where we could hide and be together for the rest of our lives. Do anything but what we planned. But I held myself in check, and didn't allow my fears and panic to escape me. I kept my face rigid and I didn't scream or cry. I just gripped Matthew's hand so tightly I'm amazed I didn't break bones.

The Excalibur and most of the White Star fleet were waiting for us when we arrived, and the other fleets broke through from hyperspace all too soon thereafter. As the most powerful ship in the ISA, the Excalibur was front and center of the fleet, with White Star Prime immediately above and behind her.

I'd begged Matthew to transfer his flag to the Excalibur, as that way we could have stayed together. He'd given me all his reasons why that wasn't possible: that the Entil'Zha needed to remain with the White Star fleet; that the Excalibur would be the main target for the enemy as our strongest ship; that as Fleet Admiral he had to keep himself distanced from the thick of the fight so he could see the overall progress of the battle, and how moving to the Excalibur would effectively remove John from command. And while I understood all that, I still hated his reasons. I didn't care about the logic or rationality of the decision. I just wanted to be with my husband until we either won or lost the battle ahead.

I almost didn't care if we lived or died, as long as we could be together. I resented the fact that my sisters could be with their husbands but I had to leave mine. But I knew that the Excalibur was the logical place for the merge to take place if it was needed, as it was the only ship big enough to hold the Technomages' small fleet of ships, which had arrived along with us. And the merge might need the help of the Mages if things went badly for us.

So when the time came, I watched first as Prime's three person shuttle took Jack and Angel across to the Excalibur, then watched again as her pilot brought the small ship back. Then it was time for me and Vya to transfer across. Matthew accompanied us down to the shuttle bay, still holding my hand tightly. When we stood by the shuttle, he took my face in his hands, kissing my cheeks, which I hadn't realized were wet with tears. Then he took my mouth with his, kissing me so hard my lips were bruised, kissing me until we both ran out of breath.

When we finally broke that kiss, I looked into Matthew's eyes, and saw the pain there. I couldn't speak, not even to say how much I loved him, as I knew if I made a sound I'd start screaming and if I started I might never stop. So I stood, mute, staring at my husband, feeling his pain and his fear, desperately trying not to send my own feelings.



After a few moments, Matthew kissed my cheek again, then said, "I love you. Nothing can change that. Just make sure you come back to me when this is over."

I nodded, then somehow managed to choke out, "And you make sure you're here for me to come back to. Because I'll find you, wherever you are, in this life or any other. I'll always find you."

Matthew kissed me one last time, hard and fast, then turned and almost ran from the shuttle bay, his Entil'Zha cloak lifting behind him from the speed of his passage. I walked up into the shuttle

with Vya at my side, not knowing if I would ever see my husband again, but determined that wherever he went, I would follow.

Matthew Gideon

I found myself sitting in my chair on Prime's bridge with no real memory of how I got there. I'd been so locked in concentration that I hadn't noticed getting from the shuttle bay to the bridge. It had taken every ounce of discipline I possessed to walk away and leave my wife standing by the shuttle that had waited to take her away from me, when all I really wanted to do was to run.

Yes, the Entil'Zha, the Fleet Admiral for the battle ahead, wanted to run away. I wanted to steal a ship, grab my wife, go back to Minbar and collect my family, then run far, far away from the madness that faced us. I wanted my family to be safe; I wanted to live a quiet life on a colony somewhere, maybe somewhere like Regula IV, where I'd first met Alwyn. Somewhere I could just be a normal man, the man I wanted to be. I wanted to be... I don't know what I wanted to be, but at that moment I wanted to be anyone but Ranger One.

But I was about forty years too late for a career change and every decision I'd ever made in my life had brought me to this moment, so I knew that I just had to suck it up and get on with the job. The job that was making sure there was a life for me and my family to live after this was all over.

My biggest fear was that I might fail in that job. I couldn't help remembering that in the alternative universe that Jack and the raiders came from, another Matthew Gideon had failed. Failed to find a cure to the Drakh plague. Failed to save Earth and Humanity. In that universe, Matthew Gideon's name had become a curse; the man who condemned the human race. Was I about to repeat that failure on a grander scale?

Because if I failed now it wouldn't just be the human race who would be in jeopardy. It would be every race in the ISA. The Interstellar Alliance would be destroyed. The Drakh and their allies would rule our part of the galaxy and I had no doubt that they would seek out and destroy every trace of resistance to their tyranny.

I'd persuaded Delenn to remain on Minbar, to organize such resistance in the event of my failure. It hadn't been easy, as she'd felt the President of the ISA should accompany her forces, but she'd eventually conceded that if we lost the battle ahead, whatever remained of the ISA forces would need a rallying point and Minbar was by far the best defended of the ISA member planets. They might not be able to defeat the Drakh, but they could hold out against them for longest, and Delenn's presence would help. So in a way, I'd already planned for failure, while telling myself I was just being appropriately cautious.

The potential for failure loomed over me as I sat brooding on the bridge, only peripherally aware of the various communications coming in and being taken by Trulann, who stood at my side. Eventually he dragged me from my mental morass by saying quietly, "The last of the fleets have now arrived, Entil'Zha and they are in position. We are ready for your command."

I should explain something about the plan I had for the battle ahead. It was an 'appropriately cautious' battle plan, and in that respect it was out of character for me. For all of my career I've been

a bit of a maverick, going in 'all guns blazing' to any battle I've faced. And I've faced more than most. I remember someone once saying that I'd been in more battles during peacetime than most Earthforce officers face in a major war, and that was true enough. But now the major war had come and now I had more responsibilities, more lives depending on me, and I was being more cautious.

I'd sent Ranger scouts into the Coriana VI system to spy on the Drakh and their allies assembling their fleet there. The Rangers had jumped into carefully selected, well concealed locations, low in planetary atmospheres, hidden by moons and the asteroid belt in that system, anywhere they wouldn't be detected.

The scouts had brought back reports on the Drakh fleet formation, and it had been apparent that the enemy was taking a 'full frontal' approach to the battle ahead. They had formed a 'shield wall', a wall of ships spread across the system, wide but not deep, so we would find it difficult to flank them, wherever we jumped in.

What they didn't know was that I had no intention of trying to flank them. I was going to draw them in, inviting them to attack me on my own terms. My fleet was formed into what was a 3-dimensional version of an old-fashioned infantry square, a formation that went back to Roman times.

I'd assembled my fleets into a cube. The four main fleets of the ISA-Earthforce, Minbari, Narn and Centauri, each formed a rectangular block running along one edge of the cube, and the center was occupied by the White Star fleet. The other ISA members' ships were fitted in between the gaps between these five main fleets, ensuring that we presented a solid wall of firepower at every possible point of contact with the Drakh. And at the center of the White Star fleet, in the cube face that would be directly facing the enemy when we jumped, was the Excalibur.

The weakness of the old infantry square was a vulnerability to artillery, but the cube didn't have that failing. Our formation prevented attacks coming in from any unexpected direction. The plan was to arrive in Coriana VI with the attacking face of my cube directly in front of the Drakh fleet. When they attacked-as we were sure they would-they would start to wrap their fleet around our cube, engaging the ships in the other faces. As ships at the cube faces became engaged in battle, they would be supported by ships from the center of the cube, which would be moved to whichever location was suffering the most intensive attack.

The cube could be static, working solely as a defensive entity, or it could be moved en masse to take advantage of any weaknesses shown by the enemy. This was the formation that I had agreed with Delenn before we left Minbar, and that Jack and I had worked so hard to organize while we were en route to Beta Durani.

Now it was time to see if all these plans would work, or if-as they usually do-our plans would fall apart. As an old Prussian Field Marshall once said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy." Or words to that effect.

I nodded at Trulann after he spoke and stood, saying, "Let's move to the map room."

We walked silently to the new map room I'd had installed on Prime, where I could see the progress of the battle more clearly on the larger, holographic map table. Once we arrived and I had the projection of my fleet clearly displayed, I said quietly, "Give the order to the fleet to jump to the pre-defined points."

Like many Minbari ships, the walls of the map room could appear to be transparent and show what was happening all around us. This always gave me a slightly queasy feeling, associated with long term agoraphobia-being left hanging in space to die alone will do that to a man-but I'd learned to quell this over the years. The yellow vortices of outgoing jump-points winked into being all around us and I watched as my fleet moved through them.

Most ships in our fleet had jump engines to form their own exits into hyperspace, and those that didn't attached themselves as closely as possible to those that did, so they were dragged through into hyperspace along with their larger companions. We drove through into the red clouds of hyperspace, linked to the beacon at Coriana VI and rode the tachyon pulses that connected the beacons, all the while staying in formation.

Then we burst back into normal space, funneling through the blue tunnels of our jump-points, and we faced the enemy. They were exactly where our scouts had placed them, and they outnumbered us. Alwyn had been wrong when he said we had superior numbers. Either that or the few days that had passed since he'd first contacted me had allowed the enemy to accumulate more ships, just as he'd warned us.

They didn't outnumber us by much, maybe about 20%, but enough to be worrying. We had similar numbers of destroyer class ships to them, but they had more fighters, brought in by their carriers. The really bad news was the nine invader command ships that were part of the fleet. We hadn't realized that so many of those bastards had escaped our hunt, and we knew that they could do a lot more damage than a Drakh ship of equivalent size.

There was nothing we could do about that, so I gave the order to advance.

I'm not going to try to give a detailed description of the battle; it's too complicated and there was too much going on. But our plan did at least survive first contact with the enemy. Our cube face hit their wall and hit it hard. The four main fleets engaged, each in their own sector of the cube, and the Excalibur led the fight from the middle. She was surrounded by White Stars, but even so, she had a tough fight on her hands, as in front of her was a solid wedge of Technomage ships.

They had somehow linked themselves together to form one large arrowhead, which was surrounded by some sort of dampening field. Even the Excalibur's main gun just seemed to bounce off the field, and I could see my old ship was taking hits from whatever weapons the Mages were using against her. I quickly sent four of the enhanced White Stars with the new main guns to help Excalibur, then turned my attention to the rest of the battle.

We were cutting a swathe through their center, still holding formation, as the Drakh fleet started to wrap around us, just as planned. I noticed that the enclosure was uneven, and that the Centauri, above me and to my left, were less engaged than the other fleets. Conversely, the Narn, below and to my right, were engaged in a fierce battle with their opponents.

I'd deliberately placed the Centauri and Narn at diametrically opposite corners of my cube, to avoid any contact between the two species. Relations were still touchy between them and I didn't want them having any excuse to start sniping at each other rather than the enemy. I moved some of my White Stars from the center of my cube to assist the Narn and briefly considered moving some of the Centauri ships into closer contact with the enemy.

I'd just decided against this-mostly because of the aforementioned potential for friction with the Narns-when a call came through from the Centauri Emperor's ship. Emperor Dius Vintari had decided to lead his fleet personally, and he now called and offered to move some of his ships in amongst the other fleets, to offer assistance and support.

Vir Cotto's successor was a handsome man in his mid-thirties. While we'd never met personally, Delenn had spoken well of him and I could feel his charm, even through the viewer. I acknowledged his offer as courteously as I could, but maintained my position. "Your consideration for your allies is very much appreciated, Emperor Vintari, but for the moment, let's leave your ships where they are. I'll contact you if I need to take you up on your kind offer."

This was a hell of a lot more polite than, "Fuck off, I'm busy!" which is what I really wanted to say. My wife would have been proud of my new-found diplomacy. It took a few more meaningless-and time-wasting-courtesies before I eventually managed to get Vintari to leave me alone, and I swung my attention back to the battle.



Although the Narn were taking a battering, and I winced every time we lost a ship or one had to retire to the center of the cube when too badly damaged, overall we were winning. The enemy was losing more ships than we were. It was chaotic and terrifying, but the ISA fleet was holding formation and we were hammering the Drakh and their allies.

The Mages' arrowhead had been broken apart by the combined main guns of the Excalibur and the enhanced White Stars-or so I thought at the time. I later found out that they'd had some help-and the individual ships were now being taken on in dog fights with the Excalibur's Starfuries and Ranger fighters, supported by the White Stars. This enabled Excalibur to turn its attention to other targets. Whenever one of our ships came up against one of the invader command ships, I'd send a White Star in to support them. If I was able to send a new, enhanced White Star, the invader ship was soon either destroyed or had to retire from the battle.

We were holding, we were slowly but surely winning, when everything changed. Or more to the point, one thing changed.

The Centauri.

They changed sides.

Suddenly, the Minbari and Earthforce fleets were facing attacks on two fronts where they touched the Centauri lines. And my central White Star fleet also came under attack, so I could no longer send

reinforcements out to the sides of my cube. Which wasn't a cube any more. It had one corner sliced off and the enemy were now amongst us.

It would have been far worse if I'd accepted the Emperor's offer to move his ships throughout my fleet, but it was still a disaster. We were now outnumbered and outgunned, our defensive formation was in chaos, and defeat was staring right at us.

There was only one thing I could do at that point. The thing I really didn't want to do. But I had no choice.

I called on the merge.

Angelique Gideon

I stood by Jack's side, clutching his hand tightly, as we watched the progress of the battle on the map table in front of us. Lily had been waiting for us when we'd shuttled over from the White Star, and after hugging her tightly, we'd waited with her in the landing bay until Demon and Vya had joined us, then followed our littlest sister down to the Excalibur's gymnasium.

Demon was locked down as tightly as I'd ever seen her. Her face was rigid, showing nothing, but I knew how much she must be suffering. Leaving Matthew must have been a horrendous wrench. I'm not sure I could have left Jack knowing that I might never see him again.

When we arrived in the gymnasium, we found that the map table from the bridge had been moved and reassembled there. John had arranged this for two reasons. First, the gym was in the center of the ship, right next door to Medbay, so it was just about the safest place we could possibly be. Second, it was a large enough space to accommodate not only the five of us and the map table, but the thirty-nine Technomages who were also assembled there.

When Jack and I had arrived on the Excalibur we'd seen the eighteen wedge-shaped Mage ships on which they'd travelled, all neatly lined up in the landing bay, with Alwyn's ship, with the distinctive dragon symbols on the wings, closest to us. So we knew the Technomages had already arrived and we were expecting to see them in the gym. I'd greeted Alwyn with a hug then looked around, asking, "Is Sarah not with you?"

Alwyn had shaken his head and smiled, "She feels she will be more useful in Medbay."

He'd then moved to join the other Mages, who had formed a circle on the other side of the gym from the map table. As Demon, Lily, Vya, Jack and I stood around the table, the Mages had started to chant and a light field formed above their heads, showing exactly the same view as we could see displayed on the map table. Yet another example of how Technomage skills and powers could make ISA technology look obsolete.

We'd all felt the brief transition through hyperspace, then watched avidly as the details of the Coriana VI system formed in the holograph suspended above the table. The enemy fleet was spread across the system, and I looked up at Jack quizzically as he took a sharp breath.

"They outnumber us. And I don't like the look of that." He turned away from me, but still holding my hand tightly, as he called across to the Mages. "Alwyn, what is that thing?" With his free hand Jack pointed at a wedge, outlined in orange but black in its center, which was heading directly for the Excalibur. It was much smaller than our ship, but it was unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

Alwyn replied with a single word. "Trouble." Suddenly the Excalibur rocked under the force of a violent impact. The battle had begun.

I watched with a combination of horror, fear and excitement as the battle evolved. Sometimes we were rocked so violently we were forced to grab the map table for support. While this was going on, I saw that the Mages had moved. Their view field had disappeared, and now they had reassembled into a triangular formation.

Alwyn stood at one corner, the woman I'd heard called Synnove at another, and a Minbari Technomage stood at the third angle. Their staffs were held between them forming a triangle and the other Mages quickly surrounded them. Another field, this time of bright, white light, started to form, but it was flat, remaining contained within the triangle of staffs held by the three senior Technomages.

I turned back to the map table to watch the battle and I could see that Matthew's tactics seemed to be working. Each part of the ISA fleet was shown in a different color in the holographic image. Jack explained that the Ranger fleet of White Stars was displayed in white symbols. Minbari were blue, Earthforce were green, Narn were brown and the Centauri purple. The enemy ships' symbols were colored red for the Drakh, yellow for the invaders, and orange for additional ships of unknown configuration.

The ISA defensive cube was holding, pushing into the enemy wall, forcing them to wrap around the cube, bringing more and more of the ISA fleet into play. But the Excalibur was still rocking from the force of the attack from the black and orange wedge.

Jack reached out and touched the map table controls, zooming in on the image of the Excalibur and its opponent. I realized it looked like one of the Mage ships, but much bigger. At that moment the chanting from the other side of the gym attracted my attention and I looked around to see that the bright triangular field had become almost blinding and was now rising above the Technomages.

I stared, open-mouthed, as the light lifted higher and higher, until it disappeared through the gym ceiling. Then I felt a tug on my hand, and Jack said, "Look."

The map table showed a small image of the Excalibur, and a tiny pinpoint of light emerged from its center. The light moved towards the black wedge, which had been impervious to the weapons the Excalibur had been firing at it. The wedge appeared to be surrounded by some sort of dampening field, which absorbed everything the Excalibur hurled at it-even the main gun-but which allowed its own weapons to fire through it.

As we watched, the pinpoint of white light settled on the black wedge and flared into non-existence. At the same moment, the field surrounding the wedge collapsed and the Excalibur's weapons started to hit home. Within seconds, the wedge had flown apart and we could now see that it had been made up of a large number of individual Technomage ships. I watched as the tiny symbols

representing Starfuries and Ranger fighters converged on the enemy Mage ships and started to engage them, soon to be joined by several White Stars.

It was beginning to look as if my sisters and I would not be needed after all and I had very mixed feelings about that. On the one hand it would be a relief not to have to draw on my powers, not to risk the darkness which always threatened to overwhelm me when I plumbed its depths. Alwyn had taught me techniques over the years which gave me much greater control of my powers, but I was still all too aware of how easily the darkness and anger which sat at my core could emerge.

But another part of me wanted to fight. I wanted to join with my sisters and Vya and regain that feeling of omnipotence, of total power to do anything I wanted, but particularly to feel the joy of destruction. There was nothing like that feeling; nothing to compare with knowing that I could destroy anything and everything that stood in my path. That feeling was addictive, and I wanted it again.

I gripped Jack's hand so tightly I knew I must have been hurting him, but it was the only thing that was keeping me grounded, keeping me in control. The feel of his hand in mine reminded me that there were other things in my life that could give me joy. It reminded me that I didn't have to kill to be happy.

Then I heard Jack whisper softly, "Oh shit."

I refocused my attention on the map table and saw what had provoked his words.

The purple symbols were moving inwards, towards the center of the cube, and they were attacking the blue, green and white symbols in their path. The Centauri had changed sides.

Part of me was horrified while another part was exultant. I'd hated the Centauri ever since they'd held me captive on Centauri Prime, when they'd placed a Keeper on me and threatened to kill Matt and John. I'd never trusted them, even when Vir Cotto had been Emperor, although I knew him to have been a kind person, who'd saved all our lives and helped us to escape when we were prisoners. Vir's death by assassination had made me even more distrustful of the Centauri Republic, but I'd had no rational reason for that wariness, so I'd kept my views to myself.

But my hatred of the Centauri was wider than my own personal feelings. I could also never forget that in his universe, Jack had lost his closest friends to the Centauri. In that awful other place it was the Centauri who had killed John and Dureena, publically torturing them to death. Now all my hatred for those monsters was vindicated. Now I would finally get my chance at revenge.

I barely heard John's voice over the ship's intercom, saying, "We need help. Matthew has asked for the merge." I was already reaching for Lily's hand on my left.

I looked up at Jack where he stood at my right and said, "I love you." Then I released his hand and he took a step backwards. Demon reached out and touched me, just as Vya made the connection with her and Lily on the other side of the map table and the merge was formed.

I can't describe how it feels to lead the merge. I have enormous power alone, but it's nothing compared to what I channel when I link with my sisters. We become a whole that is nearly omnipotent and omniscient. We only have to think of something and we know it. We only have to

touch something and we can destroy it. And I wield that power. I am the controller, the commander; the merge does what I want it to do.

I felt myself lifting out of my body, out of the Excalibur, surging out into space where I could see everything that was happening. I took a deep breath and released it. And as I exhaled, all the ships that had shown as purple on the map table were blown away. They were scattered, out of reach of the ISA fleet, where they could do no further harm.



I moved my consciousness away from the fleet to a position where I could focus on just those ships, just those I thought of as 'purple'. Then I took another deep breath. And this time I used my inhalation to draw those ships back together, pulling them closer and closer to my watching position. I could feel them fighting me, straining their engines, trying to escape the inexorable force I used to draw them in and I laughed. They couldn't possibly escape me.

Deeper and deeper I breathed, drawing them into a tighter and tighter ball, until they began to collide and explode. Still I didn't let them escape me. Still I drew them in. Part of me could hear the screams of the Centauri as they died, feel their fear as they were crushed in my grip, burned by the explosions that ripped through their ships as they collided, and I still laughed. This was my revenge. This would teach them to try to control me.

Only when I'd crushed every Centauri ship into a tight ball of metal and flesh did I finally release my breath. And I used my next exhalation to blow that ball directly into the sun of Coriana VI. I watched with immense pleasure as the sun flared briefly and swallowed my enemies.

I was still laughing as I turned my attention to the rest of the enemy fleet. I was about to reach out and obliterate them too, when a sharp stab of pain ran through me. I was outraged. Who could do that to me? Where was it coming from?

Something was trying to block me from my powers, something that was familiar, but I couldn't place it. It couldn't possibly succeed, it was far too weak for that, but it hurt and I didn't like that. I hated the thought that anything could hurt me when I was in control of the merge. I was invincible, wasn't I? How dare something try to wound me!

I searched the system using Demon's empathic powers and found the source of my discomfort. It was a ship that was half-hidden behind one of the moons of a gas giant. A ship that had been outlined in orange on the map table, so it was not Drakh nor was it an invader. It was something unknown and it held whatever it was that kept stabbing at me, trying to stop me.

With a single glare I froze all the red, yellow and other orange ships into place then turned my attention to this single orange intruder. What was it that was so familiar? What was this thin

thread of golden light that seemed to connect me to this ship? I was puzzled and angry at the impudence of this enemy. I could have reached out and obliterated the ship with a single thought, but my curiosity was aroused.

I followed the golden thread that linked me to that ship with my mind, surging along it until I could see inside the vessel. I narrowed my focus until I could see the tiny mortal beings that occupied it. I could sense around a dozen humans, most of them female, but there were two adult males on the bridge of the ship and I focused even more until I could see their faces. The shock of what I saw nearly made me lose control of my connection to the merge.

There on that ship's bridge stood Lucas Buck. And he was smiling at me. The smile that had melted my heart and soul for so long. The smile I saw on my husband's face every day, but somehow on Lucas it was a sexy smile, full of meaning, filling me with longing. I remembered every time I had seen that smile and every memory was filled with pleasure.

*No one had ever given me pleasure like Lucas had. I moaned and I wasn't sure whether it was from the pain that still stabbed at my mind or from the memory of the desires this man had both aroused and fulfilled. Desires I hadn't even known I had until he opened them up to me. This man had played my body like a musical instrument of which he was master. And now he wanted me again, wanted to give to me and take from me, wanted *me* in a way no one else in the universe could.*

I tried to break the thread that held me to him, but it was indestructible. It was thin and golden, it shimmered in the darkness of space, but it held me, bound to this man, heart and soul, and he knew it.

I watched as his smile widened and he drawled in that inimitable sexy voice, "Hello, Angel-face. I've missed you. Come on back to me, why don't you?"

And I knew I had no choice. I wrenched myself free from the merge and I teleported myself right across the Coriana VI system, materializing on the bridge of that ship, staring at my nemesis.

Jack Gideon

It probably sounds crazy but this was the first time I'd had the opportunity to see the merge in action. The only time since I'd arrived in this universe when the sisters had come together before had been above Nabula and on that occasion I'd been out cold on the floor of the Excalibur's bridge for most of the time, and I'd still been pretty out of it even when I'd regained consciousness.

This time I had a ringside seat for the performance, and what a performance it was. I can't say I was ecstatic about Matt calling on the sisters and Vya, but in the circumstances, I could see that he didn't have much choice. When the Centauri switched sides not only did we have an enemy inside our defenses, but we were now seriously outnumbered. If the ISA fleet were to stand any chance of avoiding total destruction, we had to throw every weapon we had at the enemy.

And the merge was the most powerful weapon we had; possibly the most powerful weapon that existed in the galaxy at that time. So worried as I was about my wife, and the impact that merging with her sisters and Vya would have on her, the alternative-total defeat for the ISA-was unthinkable.

As I stepped back and Angelique made contact with Deborah and Lily, I watched them and Vya change. They all went rigid and closed their eyes for a moment. Then some kind of field formed between them that may have been invisible, but it was tangible in the rush of static that enveloped us all, making the hairs all over my body stand on end.

I shivered with goose bumps all over, then shivered again as the four participants in the merge opened their eyes. From where I was standing I could see that Demon's eyes were now completely white. Not just the normal white of the sclera, but a glowing, piercing white, like light reflecting off diamonds, or shards of ice. The light that came from her eyes got brighter and brighter until I had to look away, to Vya, who stood next to her.

Vya's eyes were blue. The bright blue of his irises had bled all the across both eyes. The effect was not as piercing as Demon's eyes, but it was still startling, particularly against the golden skin and purple hair of Vya's natural appearance, which he showed as he'd taken on his mother's form. It was strange to see Ilas again, just as she'd looked when I'd first met her at my wedding. The blue of Vya's eyes was a deeper color than usual; it was the blue of a sky on a hot summer's day on Earth. A blue that spoke of warm breezes and hot winds; a color that gave reassurance that there was air to breathe.

Lily's eyes were green but not her usual emerald. They were a lighter, yellower green that covered the whites of her eyes completely. This was the green of spring, of new growth and fresh foliage on trees. I don't think I've ever seen anything that gave such an impression of life and growth as Lily's eyes gave then. She was life incarnate, springing from the warmth of the earth. I couldn't help but smile as I looked at the tiny redhead. She personified an earth goddess at that moment.

I had to move around the map table to look at my wife and what I saw made me shiver again. Her eyes were completely black. They were two deep holes of darkness in her face, voids like the vacuum of deep space, where no light penetrated. And just to make her appearance even more unsettling, her hair kept changing color.

Usually her hair is raven black, apart from what I teasingly call her 'skunk' streak of white, which flows back from one side of her forehead. Now the white from the streak was spreading out into the rest of her hair, bleaching it completely. But this was not the white hair of age. This was a blinding white, akin to the color of Demon's eyes. It would flare across her whole head, then withdraw, leaving her usual black to recover its ground, then flare again into brightness. Locks of blinding white would come and go as I watched, appalled by the changes I could see.

I realized that the white in Angelique's hair spread across her whole head as she used her powers. The more power she was using, the more the white encroached. I pulled my eyes away from the merge to look at the map table again, and adjusted it to show the whole of the battlefield. I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing there.

All the purple ships were being swept outwards from the ISA defensive cube. I couldn't work out how only the Centauri were being moved, and how they could be moved so quickly. Surely they must be travelling faster than light, but that wasn't possible. Or was it? Was the merge somehow able to rip natural laws apart and bend them to their will?



The Centauri fleet were scattered until they could do no further harm to the ISA forces, and then they started to move back together, but well away from the rest of the battle. I watched in fascination as the purple symbols moved closer and closer to each other, until they merged into a single bright purple spot of light. The whole fleet had been crushed into a single mangled ball of metal, still large enough to register on the map table, but a tiny fraction of the size of the original fleet. I wondered at the density of that ball, and whether it would generate its own gravity and attract nearby objects.

Then the purple light was thrown across the Coriana VI system. It moved at a speed that must have far exceeded that of light, as within seconds it had disappeared into the sun, which flared briefly then stabilized. I looked back at Angelique and saw that her hair had turned blindingly white, a sign of just

how much of her power she was using.

I finally understood the fears Angelique had expressed to me. It wasn't right that a human being should have control over that much power. The Vorlons had created something truly appalling when they'd created the merge. If they'd maintained control of their weapon, they could have destroyed the Shadows completely and taken total control of the galaxy. It was pure chance and the stubbornness of four women that had prevented that happening, which was fortunate for the younger races.

As I watched my wife's face, dominated by those terrifying black eyes, her expression changed. For a moment her face tightened as if something had hurt her, but this was quickly replaced by a look of total fury. Something had made Angelique angry, but looking at the map table, I couldn't see what that could have been.

There was a long pause as Angelique appeared to focus on something I couldn't see, and when I glanced again at the map table I could see that all the enemy ships had stopped moving. Then I heard a hiss and I looked back to see my wife's face had gone rigid with shock. The color drained from her cheeks and then she vanished.

There was no warning, no indication of what had happened. One second she was there and then she'd gone. I'd no idea whether she'd been taken from us, or whether she'd transported herself telekinetically. All I knew was that she'd gone and the speed of her departure had broken the merge so abruptly that the others collapsed.

Demon, Lily and Vya all hit the floor at the same moment. I didn't know what to do or which way to turn, but before I could move the Mages had joined me. Alwyn knelt by Demon's side and felt for her pulse. He looked up at me and said, "She's alive."

I screamed at the Mage, "Where is Angelique? Where did she go?" But Alwyn wasn't paying attention to me and my hysteria. He and the other Technomages were concentrating on Demon, Lily

and Vya, making sure that they were alive; trying to revive them. It only took a few minutes for them to come round, but it felt like hours.

As soon as Demon's eyes fluttered open I rushed to her, pushing Alwyn aside. "Demon, where is she? Where did she go? You must know!"

Demon shook her head, and looked up at me, obviously bewildered. "I don't know. We were merged and then..." She shook her head again before going on, "Angel is the only one of us who knows what happens when we merge. Something must have happened. She's never done this before. Give us a moment and we'll try to link with her and find her."

I could see that the tall blonde was still deathly pale, and Lily and Vya looked no better, but I was ready to scream with impatience. Anything could be happening to Angelique while they recovered. She could be dying and there was nothing I could do about it. I heard Alwyn speaking softly to Demon, telling her what had happened during the battle so far and letting her know that Matt was still safe. As if I gave a flying fuck about Matt's safety at that point. All I cared about was my wife and the delay in finding her.

It felt like an eternity but in reality it was only a few more minutes before Demon used the map table to pull herself to her feet, and two of the Mages helped Lily and Vya to stand also.

The three of them were barely capable of remaining upright, but they reached out to each other, and linked again, closing their eyes. This wasn't the merge, but I knew they had more strength together than individually and they were going to use that strength to try and find Angelique.

After a few moments, Demon opened her eyes and shook her head again. "She's blocking us. She doesn't want us to know where she is and what she's doing. We don't have the strength to find her while she doesn't want to be found." She was holding onto the edge of the map table as if she would collapse if she let it go.

Lily spoke softly from my side. "We need help, Demon. We need John. Maybe if he joins us and brings Jack in with us, he can help us find her and get her to open up to us."

I shook my head. "John's in the middle of a battle, he can't just drop everything and come down here to help us." I was doing my utmost to remain calm and reasonable, when all I really wanted was to race up to the bridge and drag John Matheson down to help with finding my wife.

Alwyn said quietly, "I think you'll find Captain Matheson has some free time. Look."

He pointed at the map table and after a few seconds I realized when he meant. All the enemy ships were still frozen. There was no movement, no firing, no battle. The ISA fleet were still mobile, maneuvering themselves into positions where they could take pot shots at the enemy, if the battle resumed.

Part of me wondered why Matt wasn't taking advantage of the pause to take out as many of the enemy as possible, but I realized that would go against all the principles the ISA stood for. Firing on a helpless enemy was not something that could be condoned. Although I did see a couple of flares of light which showed that the Narn fleet had used the delay to their advantage. The Narns were sometimes a little less scrupulous about their dealings with enemies than the rest of the ISA. I'd

always had a soft spot for Narns; if I'd have had their help in my own universe things might have ended differently.

But right then I didn't care about that. I didn't care about anything other than the fact that Angelique had gone and the clock was ticking. By now nearly half an hour had passed since she'd vanished and I didn't know whether she'd left or been taken, but I knew I had to find her. I turned to ask Lily if she could contact John, but before I could speak the doors to the gym flew open and the Captain of the Excalibur entered.

John gave me a sad smile then said, "Matthew is asking what's happened, and I've told him what Lily told me. That Angel has gone somewhere and we need to find her. He authorized me to hand over command to Nureel and come down here to help you. Give me your hand."

Before I could move, Alwyn chipped in, "We can probably help too, Captain. If you let my colleagues and I join in the link, we can provide the additional energy that I fear the witches are sadly lacking at the moment."

So we joined hands around the map table, Demon, Lily, Vya, Alwyn, Synnove and the Minbari Mage, with John and me also part of the circle. I closed my eyes and felt all their minds linking to mine. It was like nothing I've ever experienced. I was part of something bigger than myself, but somehow I maintained my individuality. Then I heard John's voice in my head.

"Reach out to her, Jack. Find her. Tell Angel that you love her and that you're coming to get her, wherever she is. Feel for her, Jack. Love her."

I tried to do what he said, but all I could manage was a single anguished scream. "Angelique!"

Lucas Buck

When Angel appeared out of nowhere in front of me on the bridge of the Circe I found it hard to hide just how surprised I was. There were two reasons for that. The first was that I had no idea she was strong enough to teleport herself half way across a solar system and materialize exactly where she wanted. The second was the way she looked.

I'd never seen Angel like that. She looked like something that had just escaped from hell. Not the soft, kittenish Angel I'd known, albeit a kitten with claws, but now she was a hell cat with talons instead. Now she was an avenging Angel, and I was half surprised she didn't hold a flaming sword to smite her enemies. I'd had some experience of avenging angels in a previous life and knew the look well.

Angel's usual raven locks were bleached a blazing white and her eyes were two black pits, like caverns giving entry to the underworld or maybe an exit for something that was trying to get out of there. The expression on her face was savage, a mixture of lust and vengeance that I'd never seen before. Unsettling to say the very least, as I had an uncomfortable notion about whom she'd want to take vengeance on.

But despite all of that she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She was magnificent in her strength and I wanted her more than I ever had before. Now she was a true partner for the Rage

that lived within me and I could feel it stir as I stared at the apparition in front of me.

I heard Afolayan curse softly behind me and quickly pulled myself together.

I gave Angel my most charming smile and said softly, "Hello, Angel-face. I've missed you." I watched as she hovered about half a meter above the deck of the bridge, wondering whether she'd just kill me, or if I might get the chance to talk her down. Literally.

Those black pits glared back at me as she hissed, "Lucas. I should have known it was you. Something was hurting me and that was always what you did best."

I let my sadness show and for once it wasn't a complete act. "I never wanted to hurt you, Angel-face, not in a way you didn't enjoy." I allowed a small, lascivious smile to cross my lips at the memory of the times when we'd mixed a little pain with a lot of pleasure, then hurried on, "I know I did hurt you, more than I should and more than you ever deserved, and I'm sorry. Believe me, Angel, I am truly sorry for any pain I caused you."

*Some of that must have got through as her hair started to pulse between the blinding white and her more usual raven black, and she gradually lowered herself to stand on the deck in front of me. But her eyes were still twin pits of darkness as she spat, "Too little, too late, Lucas. What are you doing here, what were you trying to do and what is this *thing*." She gestured with her right hand and a glowing golden thread appeared in front of me, linking her chest to mine.*

I heard Afolayan's sharp intake of breath behind me and tried to block him and the other people on the bridge out of my mind. I needed every ounce of concentration I had to focus on this conversation with Angel if any of us were to get out of this alive.

*"This *thing*," I imitated her intonation and gesture, "is what you created all those years ago when you cast that spell on Gideon. What was it again?" I pretended to try to recall, when in fact those words were engraved on my memory. Those words had freed me from the Apocalypse Box that had been my prison for over two hundred and fifty years.*

"O ancient powers of time and space, bring forth the one inside him. Bind him to me in love. To me alone he will come. All others he shall spite."

"Those were your words, Angel. That was your spell. And it was a good one. You didn't know then just how much power you had access to, but you drew on all that power when you called on me. So I came forth, and I came to you, and you bound us together, in love. Neither of us has ever been able to break that binding, Angel. It still connects us. We belong together. Come back with me, Angel. We need to be together again."

All the while I was speaking, the black had been washing back into her hair until there was only a single streak of white, running back from her forehead. But her eyes were still black, so I knew I still had to tread carefully.

"As to what I'm doing here, I'm trying to save lives. I wouldn't have chosen to be here, but the Drakh and their allies threatened me and my people. The only way I could save my colony was to agree to come here and try to block you."

Angel opened her mouth to speak but I held my hand up and to my surprise she hesitated so I went on, "I don't want the Drakh to win any more than you do, darling, but I couldn't let them kill the people who look to me for protection. I had to do what they asked of me. I knew I could never block you completely, not now you've come into your full power."

That was a lie of course. I'd had no idea how powerful Angel had become. It had been a very nasty surprise to find that I could no longer block her, but she didn't need to know that. The main thing was that she was calming down and I was getting through to her. I always could charm her when I tried, although sometimes it took a little while for the message to get through.

When Angel spoke this time, her black eyes looked almost sad. "Why did it hurt me, Lucas? It never hurt before when you blocked me."

That was good. It seemed she'd swallowed my story about trying to save lives. I shook my head and did my best to look sorrowful, "I don't really know, Angel. Maybe it was because you were merged with your sisters. I've never tried to block you when you've been in the merge before."

It was a mistake. Angel's white streak started to widen as she hissed at me again, "How do you know about the merge?"

I gave her my most innocent look, "Why you told me, darling. You told me all about what the Vorlons did to you and your sisters, remember? And you told me all about how you came together to fight." The white streak narrowed as she calmed again, so I hurried on, "What I didn't know was that you could still merge with just the three of you. I heard about your sister dying. I'm sorry about that."

It was easy to simulate sorrow at that point. I truly was sorry; sorry that I'd underestimated what the three remaining sisters could still do.

Angel shook her head sadly, "Ilas died saving us all. She gave her life for us. But we found that her son, Vya, could replace her in the merge. He's a shape shifter, just like his mother was."

Well that explained how they'd gotten so powerful. I mentally cursed the shape shifter's son and decided he'd be a good subject for retrospective birth control if our paths ever crossed in future. But for now, I needed to focus on laying on the charm with a shovel. Those things have a thousand uses.

"It must have been hard losing a sister like that, Angel. It's hard losing family. I know how important family is to you, just like it is to me. Come back to me, Angel. Come back and be a family with me again. With me and Gabriel."



I knew I was taking a big risk bringing up Gabe at that point, but it had to be done. Our son was always going to be the elephant in the room between us. The subject had to be addressed. I watched warily as the white streak in Angel's hair pulsed, but she stayed calm as she asked, "Where is he, Lucas? Where's our son? I've been looking you know, searching for you both. But I never found you."

I smiled gently and lied, "I wish I'd known you wanted to find us, Angel. I'd have contacted you sooner. You know I never wanted you to leave. I wanted you to stay with me so we could raise our son together. I wanted us to be a real family."

Some of that was true. I hadn't wanted Angel to leave, but I would never have allowed her to raise Gabe in the way she would have wanted. She would have ruined him. But she didn't know that, so I carried on lying. "He's a fine boy, Angel, although he's missed having a mother in his life. But it's not too late. Come back with me and be his mother now. We can be happy together. You, me and Gabe. We can be a family."

I didn't want to admit that Gabe was on the ship with me just then. I wanted Angel well and truly back under my thumb before she met him. It wouldn't take long for her to discover just what sort of son I'd raised, so I needed to delay that meeting for a while at least.

Angel looked at me sadly again, "For how long, Lucas? How long until that thing inside you decides it's time to move on and takes our son? How long before your heir kills you and the devil possesses our son? I know all about it, Lucas; the Rage that gives you your power. And I know that one day it will want a new host. And on that day you'll die and my son will be lost forever. What sort of family would we be then, Lucas?"

She was right of course, but I had to convince her otherwise. "It doesn't have to be like that, Angel. We have the chance to free ourselves. If you come back to me now, if you help me end this battle and this war, then we can find another host for the Rage. You can help me be free of it and make sure Gabe is never taken. You're powerful enough to do that now. Help me, Angel, help us both."

More lies of course. I'd never willingly give up the Rage. It might sometimes make me do things I regretted but it also gave me the power I needed to control people. It made me strong enough to do what I wanted, to take what I wanted. I didn't plan on letting that go. But Angel didn't need to know that. Not yet awhile anyway. Not until I had her back under control.

But she still wasn't convinced. "What new host? I thought it had to be a Buck. An heir of your body." She almost spat out the words and that dangerous white streak pulsed again.

I needed to come up with an explanation quickly. Fortunately, at that moment I caught a glimpse of the viewscreen at the side of the bridge. It showed the Drakh fleet and their allies, still frozen in place. The ISA fools weren't wiping them out, as I would have done in their place. Too honorable and ethical to blast a sitting target out of space. Suckers.

I pointed at one of the invader ships and said, "See those new guys? The ones who came in from the other universe? They're ideal for the Rage. Stronger than humans, tougher, and with none of our sentimentality and humanity. It's driven most of those qualities out of the Bucks over the generations, but there's still enough left to cause it problems now and then. It would prefer a host that doesn't give a damn, that doesn't have a conscience."

Which was true, but I still had no intention of letting the Rage shift to another host. Apart from anything else, there was the little problem that the Rage and I were now so bonded, so interlinked, that I'd die if it moved on. But Angel didn't need to know that. I went on, "You can help free me, Angel. You can make sure that our son is never taken over by it. Come back to me, Angel. Help me and Gabe live our lives free of the Rage. We can have that happy ever after you always wanted."

I knew I'd said something wrong as soon as I finished. That damnable white streak pulsed again and the blackness in Angel's eyes, which had been clearing, flooded back. The hell cat had returned.

"My happy ever after? You plan to give me that do you? How could I ever be happy with you, Lucas? How could I be happy knowing that you killed the man I loved?"

I was confused for a moment, then I remembered the damned Ranger who Boyle had tossed out of the airlock. The one with Angel's name tattooed across his chest. I protested at once, "Hey, that wasn't me, Angel! I wanted to save him. When we caught those two Rangers spying on us, I wanted to keep them safe. But the Raiders took one of them and killed him. There was nothing I could do to save him, Angel, I promise you,"

Somehow I'd made things worse. Telling the truth really doesn't work for me. Angel's hair flooded with white again and her eyes almost glowed with darkness. You don't think darkness can glow? You should have been looking where I was looking then.

Instead of Angel's usual soft voice, a grating rasp growled at me, "Which one, Lucas? Which one did you kill?"

I knew that whatever answer I gave it wasn't going to help, but there was no way out. I decided I might as well keep telling the truth. "He said his name was Fillioni. The other one-Marcus Cole-is safe back on my colony." Well, he had been when I left at least.

Black tears trickled down Angel's face as she whispered, "Mal. His name was Mal Fillion and he was a good man, Lucas. A brave man. He loved me when I needed love and never asked for anything I wasn't willing to give. Unlike you."

Angel's hair turned completely white again and her eyes were pits as she hissed at me, "You take and you take, Lucas. You took my love and used me. You took my child and made me walk away. And you took the life of the man who could have given me my happy ever after. You killed Michael Healy and I'll never forgive you for that."

Shit. Now I knew I was in deep trouble.

Angelique Gideon

When I arrived on Lucas' ship I was almost completely out of control. Almost. The lust for death and vengeance surged through me, urging me to kill anything and everything that stood in my path. I wanted to kill everything that had ever hurt me, everything that might hurt me, everything... Just everything. There was joy in death and destruction and I wanted that joy.

But one look at Lucas' face had calmed that yearning for annihilation. That face belonged to the man I loved. But which man? It seemed I had been in love with that face in one form or another for most of my life. And the features in front of me hadn't changed in all the years that had passed. There were no gray strands in Lucas' hair. No lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. These were the features I had first fallen for so many years ago.

And the voice. That voice, so sexy, so seductive, so similar to the other men I'd loved with that face, but so different. The drawl that made me shiver with a different kind of lust. Not for death, but for sex. For raw, passionate, rough and painful sex. I wanted to ravage this man and I wanted him to ravish me. Memories of all the times we'd been together flooded through me and I could feel myself becoming aroused, longing to rip his clothes off, mount him and ride him until we both screamed for release.

I reined all that passion in as Lucas spoke and I became aware of something else. Something that had never happened before. I could tell when Lucas was lying. I listened to him weave the truth and lies together, as always a master of deceit, and I knew the difference. As he spoke, I wondered where this newfound insight came from and I wondered if somehow when I'd broken the merge so violently, some of Demon's talent for truth-telling had stayed with me. It was the only explanation I could think of for how I could now distinguish Lucas' lies from the truth.

I could feel my sisters and Vya trying to link with me and brushed them aside as a distraction. I needed to focus on Lucas and what he was saying. I needed to listen to his lies.

He wove them well, I'll give him that. Just enough truth to calm me, to reassure me, to lull me into thinking that perhaps I'd judged him too harshly in the past. Perhaps he'd mellowed with the years. Perhaps he could now be someone who deserved my compassion and my love. For a moment I was tempted. I wondered if I should join Lucas and my son, leave this space with them and live the rest of my life with them.

I listened as Lucas described the alien race that could provide a host for the Rage, freeing him and my son from that curse. And I knew he was lying. I knew he would never give up the Rage. It was the source of his power, it gave him the ability to control people and he would never give that up willingly. And he lied when he spoke of our son, and that nearly broke my heart. I knew our son was not the 'fine boy' that Lucas described. Having been under Lucas' influence for all his life, he couldn't be. Gabriel would have been twisted and warped to his father's needs and desires.

And despite all that, I still longed to believe Lucas's lies. As I looked at him, I longed to be with him again. I wanted the family he offered so badly that I almost forgot the family I already had. For I also realized that I was no longer afraid of Lucas. All the time we'd been together a part of me had always been afraid. Afraid he'd leave me, afraid he'd hurt me, afraid that he would never love me as I loved him. But the fear had left me. I knew that Lucas could never hurt me unless I chose to let him. I was stronger than him now, and I could choose for myself. I had true free will, no longer just the illusion.

Then two things happened at once. First, I felt my sisters and Vya link again to my mind, but this time, they were stronger, reinforced by John's telepathic powers, and the energy of the Technomages who stood behind them. And they brought my husband with them. I heard his voice in my head, screaming my name, and I remembered how much I loved him. How Jack had always loved me, had

stayed with me and made me happy. How Jack had given me the happy ever after I had longed for from Lucas but never experienced.

The second thing was Lucas' fatal mistake. He reminded me of Michael. Of my first husband, who'd been murdered because of Lucas' jealousy. I'd loved Michael with all my being and his death had nearly killed me. And Lucas was responsible for that and for so many other dreadful things that had happened in my life. So I threw that in his face.

"My happy ever after? You plan to give me that do you? How could I ever be happy with you, Lucas? How could I be happy knowing that you killed the man I loved?"

Lucas controlled his confusion well, but I could still feel it. For a moment he looked puzzled and then he spoke.

"Hey, that wasn't me, Angel! I wanted to save him. When we caught those two Rangers spying on us, I wanted to keep them safe. But the Raiders took one of them and killed him. There was nothing I could do to save him, Angel, I promise you,"

He'd misunderstood me completely, but in doing so he'd revealed that he'd captured Marcus and Mal and one of them was now dead. But which one? I loved them both in different ways, and there was no good way for this to end.

When Lucas told me that Mal was dead, I grieved for the loss of that wonderful man. We'd given each other so much pleasure and joy, and I'd thought we were friends above all else. I'd been so sad when I realized that Mal felt more for me than friendship and lust, but by then I was married to Jack and Mal had been forced to accept that I could never love him as he'd loved me. I wept as I remembered my Ranger cowboy and the wonderful times we'd had together.

And now Mal was dead. And Michael was dead. And who knows how many other people, who'd got in Lucas' way. All the hatred and fear of Lucas welled up in me and I felt myself losing control again as I screamed at him. I wanted to kill him, but I still loved him and I was losing myself in conflicting emotions when I felt my sisters touch my mind again.

This time it wasn't just Jack's voice I heard in my head. This time I felt him link to me, become almost part of me. I felt what he felt, and I knew that he was almost in despair. He thought he'd lost me and he didn't want to live without me. And then I knew who really loved me.

Not Lucas, with his lies and deceptions and promises of a family that could never be.

I already had a family who loved me. My family was my husband, Jack, my sisters and their husbands, my nieces and nephews, my friends and crew. They all loved me and wanted me to come back to them. They wanted me, not for what I could do for them, as Lucas did, but for what they could do for me. They wanted me to be loved. To be treasured and cosseted. I might be the most powerful person in the galaxy, but my family didn't care. They wanted to care for me and love me. And that was all that mattered.



I didn't even listen to Lucas' excuses and lies about why he had killed Michael. My lust and passion for Lucas died in that moment and all I felt for him was pity. He was as much a victim of the Rage as I was. And I knew he would never willingly give it up.

I cut across his words and said, "I have a job to do and then I'll come back. We're going to finish this, Lucas. Once and for all."

Then I teleported myself back to the Excalibur and back into Jack's arms, where I belonged.

It didn't take long to calm everyone down and initiate the merge once more. And it took even less time to wipe the galaxy clean of the Drakh, the dark Technomages and all their allies. As controller of the merge I reached out and touched their ships and as I touched, they vanished, obliterated. I sent the whole fleet into the sun of Coriana VI to join their Centauri allies, and at the time I felt not the slightest qualm in doing so. The Drakh had been a force of destruction and evil for too long and the galaxy would be better without them.

When we'd finished, I dissolved the merge far more gently than I had before. As we all returned to our bodies, I looked around at the people surrounding me and smiled sadly. I felt Jack's arms around me, holding me tightly, and I never wanted him to let go, but I knew I had one last task to complete and I knew I had to do it alone.

I took Demon and Lily's hands again, and smiled across at Vya. "Thank you, all of you. Thank you for reminding me who I am, and what's important to me." I could see the looks my sisters were giving me. They knew that I was going to do something reckless and dangerous, and they knew I was going to do it alone. But they didn't ask me what I had planned and they didn't try to stop me. I think they knew that this time they couldn't help me. I'd sworn that I would never put them in danger again, and I was going to stand by that vow.

I'd thought I would need the merge to be able to stand up to Lucas and the Rage, but now I was sure I could do it alone. With the strange leftover from my sisters' abilities that I still carried inside me, I was sure I was strong enough. I hoped.

I turned in my husband's arms and looked up at him. I looked at that face that was so similar to Lucas but so different. I saw the gray hairs and the lines that marked his face and I loved them all. But mostly I saw something in Jack's eyes that I'd never seen in Lucas. I saw that his love for me was so strong that he'd gladly give his life for me. He would give anything to make me happy and Lucas could never do that.

I smiled up at Jack and whispered, "I love you. I can't tell you how much I love you and how grateful I am that you love me. We are going to spend every moment of the rest of our lives together, and nothing makes me happier than that. But for now, I have one thing left that I have to do, and I have to do it alone. Wait for me, Jack. Please."

I saw him frown and I knew he wasn't happy with the idea of me leaving again, but even so he stepped back and released me from his embrace. Leaning forward, he kissed me gently on the forehead and said, "I trust you, Angelique. Do what you have to do and come back to me. I'll wait for you, for however long it takes. Whenever you're done, I'll be here, waiting."

And that truth-telling sense that somehow I'd borrowed from Demon told me that he meant every word. He would wait forever if he needed to, and when I returned, he would take me in his arms and love me. Jack truly was my happy ever after.

I didn't want to go back to Lucas, but I knew I must. I knew we had to end things between us. I knew I had to try and save my son, and I knew there was only one way to do that. I had to destroy the Rage.

I jumped back to Lucas' ship and this time he was alone on the bridge. He was staring out of the viewscreen at the cold darkness of space, where the stars glittered against a backdrop of pure black. He turned as I arrived and smiled as he said, "I asked Captain Afolayan to take his crew and leave us. I thought that whatever happened next should be just between us."

There was a strange calmness about him, something I'd never seen before. Lucas had always been driven, ready for the next thing, ready to take on the galaxy and wrestle it into submission, but all that was gone. Now he seemed willing to accept his fate, to allow whatever would happen to happen.

I smiled back at him but didn't speak. I knew what had to happen next and I knew how I had to do it. As well as Demon's truth-telling ability, I seemed to have somehow hung onto a little of Lily's prescience and mental blocking powers. I used the former to sense the Rage as it stirred within Lucas and got ready to attack me. Then I used the latter to build a block around the Rage to stop it in its tracks.

I held the Rage tightly, confining it, restricting it, controlling it and preventing it from controlling Lucas. As I held it I looked at Lucas sadly, and asked, "What do you want, Lucas? Do you really want this thing? Do you want it to go on living inside you, driving you to do awful things, and eventually deciding to kill you so it can move on? Move onto our son and control him and drive him as it has done to you. Do you really want that, Lucas? Tell me what you want."

Lucas gazed back at me and for the first time ever, he seemed at peace. For just that moment, I saw the man he could have been, the man the Rage had never allowed him to be. And I knew I could have loved that man as much as I loved Jack. But that could never have been, as without the Rage, Lucas would have died long before we'd ever met. It was only the Rage that had kept his spirit alive within the Apocalypse Box, waiting to trick me into freeing them.

Lucas smiled and said softly, "I think it's time for the Buck boys to be set free, don't you, Angel-face? It's time to end it." He stepped towards me and gently took my hands in his, then leaned forward and kissed my forehead as Jack had only a few moments before.

Then he whispered, "If I could have loved anyone, Angel, it would have been you. Despite everything, I came closer to loving you than anyone ever in my very long life. Gabriel is on this ship. Take him with you, but be careful. He's been raised as a Buck and he'll be dangerous when he gets older. I hope you can change him. Now do what you have to do."

Lucas' eyes were filled with sadness as he took a step back from me, but still held my hands. Tears trickled down my face as I looked at him, all the time holding the Rage in check, knowing that for the first time ever, I was looking at the real Lucas Buck.

My throat was too tight to speak, so I nodded and closed my eyes. I heard Lucas whisper one last time, "Set me free, Angel, set me free."

And I did. I reached out with my mind and with the powers that my sisters had loaned me as well as my own powers, I killed the Rage. I killed it dead. And with it, I killed Lucas Buck.

He died instantly and I fell to my knees, weeping over his body. My grief was indescribable, but I knew I'd done the right thing. And I knew I would go on living, despite how I felt at that moment, because I still had so much to live for. So after a few moments of indulging my grief, I stood slowly and walked to the door of the bridge.

As I'd suspected, Captain Afolayan and his crew were standing just outside. I waved them in and said, "Lucas said my son is on board, so can you have him brought to me, please?"

Afolayan looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded and dispatched one of his women to fetch Gabriel. He nodded at Lucas' body where it lay on the deck and asked, "We knew him as Connor, not Lucas. What do you want done with him?" His face was kind and gentle. Somehow he seemed to understand that I'd loved Lucas even though I'd just killed him.

Before I could answer, he went on, "We talked a lot over the last couple of days. He was a strange man. Almost two men. Part of him was good company, amusing and smart. Then the other part was dangerous and could be vicious. I'd like to honor the man whose company I enjoyed. We can send him into space and cremate him with our guns. If that's what you want."

My tears were flowing again by this time and I couldn't speak, so I just nodded. Afolayan patted my arm gently and said, "We'll treat him kindly and with respect. We all liked him."

Then the woman he'd sent to collect Gabriel appeared in the doorway, along with my son.

It was the first time I'd seen Gabriel since he was a baby, and it was a shock. He didn't look like me or his father, but somehow like both. His hair was darker than Lucas' but not black like mine, and his eyes were a greyish blue, not my bright blue. But there was no doubting whose son he was, and I could see Afolayan looking from him to me and back, nodding to himself.

Gabriel was a little shorter than me still, but I knew he would grow tall and strong like his father. He looked beyond me to Lucas's body where it lay on the deck and asked, "What happened? Who did that?"

I could sense his anger and his fear, so I said quietly, "It was what your father wanted. He's free now."

Gabriel looked at me through narrowed eyes, then nodded. "So what happens to me? And who are you?"

I smiled gently, my heart going out to him. "You can come with me, Gabriel. I'm your mother."

Gabriel looked back at me, his face completely impassive, and said, "My father told me you didn't want me when I was a baby, so why do you want me now?"

I shook my head. "That wasn't true, Gabriel. I always wanted you. But it was complicated. I'll tell you everything soon. But for now, we need to go."

My son looked puzzled as I held out my hand. "Go where? And how?"

I smiled again. "You'll see." Then I took his hand and teleported us both back to the Excalibur.



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