

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Five B - Part 4: Darkness Descends

by The Space Witches



Trulann

Chapter 5

30th July 2291

Matthew Gideon

The sudden disappearance of the entire Centauri fleet was one of the sweetest sights I have ever seen, not excepting that of my wife waiting in bed for me, wearing nothing but her black stockings with the lacy tops.

I turned to Trulann and said, "Did I just see what I think I saw?"

He nodded gravely and gestured toward the map table. "And that's not all. Look at the rest of the enemy fleet."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, before I appreciated what had been done. "They're not moving. They're not doing anything."

Trulann nodded and held his earpiece close to his head, listening intently. I waited until he'd finished, when he nodded again and said, "The entire enemy fleet is inactive. The ISA forces await your orders."

That was a tough one. If we attacked now, we could destroy the Drakh and their allies with no losses of our own. But could I really authorize the destruction of a fleet that was essentially defenseless?

Silently cursing the fact that I knew exactly what Delenn would say, I shook my head and said, "Advise all commanders to move their forces into attack positions, but hold until they have further orders. Let's use this time to get our damaged ships back into the center where we can defend them, and move fresh forces into position. We don't know how long this will last. And get me the Excalibur. I want to know what's going on over there."

Trulann nodded and started murmuring into his headset. I watched the map table carefully as he passed on my orders, waiting for the battle to start again, but the enemy remained frozen in space. The only movements were those of my own forces, obeying the commands I'd just given.

After a few moments, Trulann spoke again. "Captain Matheson says they have a problem. The merge appears to have dealt with the Centauri and stopped the enemy, but then it broke apart." He paused for a second, listening to what was coming into his earpiece, then asked for a repeat.

My XO looked shocked as he spoke again. "It would seem that Mrs. Angelique Gideon broke the merge then teleported herself off the Excalibur. No one knows where she has gone."

For a moment I stared at Trulann with my mouth open. Then I whispered, "Deborah." I didn't think Trulann had heard me but he nodded and murmured into his headpiece. After a brief pause he looked up at me with a small smile.

"The other members of the merge collapsed when Mrs. Gideon left abruptly, but they are recovering and are unharmed."

I closed my eyes in relief and wondered what the hell Angel was playing at this time, cursing her for taking off in the middle of a battle. Although to be fair, it looked as if she'd taken care to make sure the enemy couldn't harm us before she went. Nevertheless...

"Tell Captain Matheson to get down to the gymnasium and find out what's going on. He's to use any means he thinks necessary, including his telepathic abilities, to find Angel and bring her back."

Trulann nodded, and again conveyed my orders. I kept on watching the map table, silently running through exactly what I wanted to say and do to Angel. She wasn't a girl any more, she should have learned to take more responsibility. What the hell did she think she was doing disappearing in the middle of a battle when we needed her? And where the hell had she gone? I kept scanning the map table for any signs of action from the enemy, but nothing moved. I'd started to pace impatiently back and forth when my XO finally spoke again.

"Mrs. Gideon has returned to the Excalibur."

He paused and as he turned to the map table again, his eyes widened. I span around and watched with him, noticing that now the points of light indicating the enemy ships had started to wink out. It was like watching a cloud spreading quickly between us and the enemy fleet. A swathe of darkness cut into their lights, wiping out the red, yellow and orange sparks that, moments before, had indicated the Drakh, the invaders and their allies. I watched open mouthed as the orange bordered black wedges winked out of existence and turned to Trulann, my mouth still open.

Trulann looked back at me, his face mirroring my own astonishment. I'd known the merge was powerful, but this... Hundreds of ships had just disappeared and hundreds more were vanishing as

we watched.

I turned and looked out through the apparently clear walls of the map room into the darkness of space, looking for any signs that the enemy was still out there, but of course I could see nothing. The battle had been far too spread out for me to see many ships with the naked eye, and those I could see were all Whitestars. The only exception was the Excalibur, which hung below us in the darkness, holding position as ordered.

I turned back and saw that within minutes the only lights remaining above the map table were those indicating the presence of the ISA fleets. The enemy had been wiped out of existence. I couldn't think of a thing to say and it seemed that Trulann was equally speechless until his hand lifted to his ear again, and he listened carefully.

Looking up at me and frowning, he said, "She's gone again. She went back, joined the merge, wiped out the enemy fleet, then teleported out again. They still don't know where she's gone." Even Trulann had lost his usual tone of reasoned formality and he sounded exasperated. He wasn't alone. As I opened my mouth to speak he added hurriedly, "The other members of the merge are conscious and unhurt."

With one last glance at the map table I said, "Right. Get the fleet organized for a search of the system. We need to make sure there are no Drakh, invaders or dark Technomages hiding out anywhere. Then get the shuttle prepared for departure. I'm going over to the Excalibur."

I span on my heel and left the map room at a trot, giving more orders for the movements of the fleet as I ran, cursing my stupid Entil'Zha's robes, which flapped behind me. I swore that before I retired from my current role I'd get the Rangers' uniforms redesigned into something more practical, something less voluminous, something more tailored, as long as it didn't make me look like a bellhop.

Angelique Gideon

When I arrived back in the Excalibur's gymnasium I found that my audience had changed somewhat. All the Technomages other than Alwyn had left. Alwyn was standing talking quietly to Vya and Sarah Chambers, who'd joined them in my absence. John and Lily had also been joined by Luke Raven, and the three of them now stood silently in a group, holding hands with their eyes closed. I knew John must have linked them mentally and they were giving each other whatever love and support they all needed.

Matt must have shuttled over from Whitestar Prime as he stood with Demon in his arms, holding her so tightly I'm sure he was leaving bruises. But Demon didn't look as if she cared. Her head leaned on Matt's shoulder and he had his face buried in her hair. They stood like statues, not appearing to notice my return at first.

The last person I saw in the gym was my husband. The look on his face when I appeared nearly broke my heart. He looked exhausted and his eyes were full of despair. I hadn't seen him look like that since he'd arrived in our universe, when all hope had left him. Now he looked that way again and it was my fault.

I flung myself at him and felt his arms wrap around me as I whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I promised you I wouldn't leave you and I broke my promise, but I had to go, and I had to do it, but I'll never leave you again, I promise, never, ever, ever leave you again."

And all the while I was crying in his arms, I felt him kissing my face, wiping my tears away with his prickly beard, unwilling to use his hands because to do so he would have to let go of me and I knew he would never want to do that again. It was tempting to just stay there, wallowing in Jack's love, but I had other responsibilities, so I pulled myself back a little and looked around.



Gabriel stood a little way from me, clutching his bag in front of him, using it as a shield against the world. My heart went out to him; he looked so small and vulnerable. He was in a strange place with strange people and his world had just fallen apart. However much I wanted to be with my husband—just the two of us alone; reassuring and loving him—I couldn't desert my son.

Stepping away from Jack, I moved to put my arm around Gabriel's shoulders, but he sidled away before I could touch him. It hurt, but I knew I had to be patient. He didn't know me; he knew nothing about me other than that I'd left him as a baby and as far as he knew, had never even tried to find him. It would take time and love to show him how much he meant to me.

"Gabriel, this is my husband, Jack." I turned to look at Jack and tried to smile as I said, "Jack, this is my son, Gabriel."

Jack looked stunned. I saw his lips move but no words came out, but the shape of his mouth showed he was trying to say, "Your son?"

I nodded. "He was with his father in a ship somewhere in this solar system. Don't ask me where, but hiding I assume."

Jack looked closely at me, saying softly, "His father?" He didn't seem able to do anything but repeat my words back to me, but then went on, "Where's his father now?"

My husband, of course, knew all about my history with Gabriel's father. He looked stunned as I said, "Dead. Lucas is dead."

I wasn't able to stop the tears that welled up into my eyes as I said this, hardly able to believe it myself. Lucas was dead. I would never see him again. He could never hurt me again, but he could never love me either. I felt as if a small part of me had died with him and I knew I would never be the same again. But again, I had to push my own needs to one side. There were things that had needed to be done, and urgently.

I turned towards where John, Lily and Luke had broken from their inward facing circle and said, "Captain Matheson, I apologize for having brought a guest on board your ship without your

permission. May I introduce my son, Gabriel, and belatedly ask permission for him to come aboard?"

John gave me a half smile, acknowledging my formality. "Thank you, Angel, permission granted of course, although I'm surprised Security haven't..."

Before he could finish his sentence the doors to the gym swept open and a large Minbari woman entered, accompanied by four even larger Marines. John held his hand up and halted the group with a gesture, saying, "It's OK, Nureel, everything is under control."

The Minbari frowned, and said, "Sensors detected an intruder who isn't registered on our database."

John nodded and pointed at Gabriel, who looked more frightened than ever. I moved quickly to his side and this time he allowed me to rest my arm on his shoulders. "This is Gabriel..." John hesitated, not sure what last name to call Gabriel by.

My son lifted his chin and said firmly, "Black. My name is Gabriel Black." Well, that was news to me.

I let it pass as John went on, "Mr. Black's mode of entry was a little informal, but we'll get him logged into the security database and in the meantime he has my permission to stay on board. Leave two of your Marines outside the gym and the rest of you can return to your duties."



The Minbari woman gave a very smart salute and left the gym with the Marines following her. I then turned as I heard Matt's voice behind me. To be honest, I was surprised he'd stayed quiet for so long. I'd expected him to start yelling at me as soon as I'd arrived.

"Angel, I think you have some explaining to do." He was right, of course. He and Demon stood side by side, but Matt's arm was still firmly wrapped

around my sister's waist. I noticed that Demon wasn't looking at me, but at Gabriel, and she was frowning. That wasn't good.

I nodded and said, before anyone else could butt in, "I do. I know I do. But the person who needs explanations most right now is my son. He doesn't know who any of you are, where he is or what's going to happen to him. Can you all give me the time and space I need to help him? Please?"

I looked from John to Matt to Jack, my eyes begging each of them to understand that Gabriel needed help and support, and that everything else would need to wait. I could see my son looking at Jack and Matt, his expression both confused and afraid. It was hardly surprising as both men looked so like his father.

Before anyone else could speak, Gabriel blurted out, "You both look like my dad. Are we related?"

Matt's mouth twisted into a rather disagreeable snarl as he said, "Distantly." He'd always hated the fact that he was descended from Lucas Buck.

I turned to John and asked, quickly, "Is there somewhere quiet where Jack and I can talk to Gabriel and explain everything?"

John nodded, "You can use the guest rooms on deck 2, which used to be Matthew and Demon's quarters. The Entil'Zha has decided that the Excalibur is going to accompany the Whitestar fleet back to Minbar, once we've checked out this system to make sure there are no enemy ships left, so you may as well stay on board with us. We'll have your things brought across from Prime, if that's acceptable, Entil'Zha?"

Matt didn't have much choice other than to agree. He nodded reluctantly and said, "The ISA member fleets will be returning to their own territories and the Rangers will do any mopping up necessary. If any mopping up is needed?" He looked at me quizzically. As director of the merge only I knew exactly how thorough we'd been in eradicating the enemy.

I shook my head, "There's just the one ship left. We..." I hesitated a moment, trying to find the right word. "...eliminated all the other enemy ships."

The sheer scale of the destruction we'd wreaked threatened to overwhelm me for a moment, then I pulled myself back together. "The ship that's left is no danger to you. They just want to get out of here in one piece. They took no part in the battle. I'll explain everything later, but now, please, can we go somewhere quiet? I really need..."

Much to my amazement, the gym started to swim around my head, and a wave of nausea swept over me. The next thing I knew, I was sitting on the floor with my head between my knees, with Luke Raven at my side and lots of different voices that seemed to be shouting over my head.

Luke said, softly, "I should really take you to Medbay, Angel, but I doubt you'd want that right now, would you?"

I looked up into the face of my dearest friend and smiled at him. "Not right now, Luke. I need to talk to Gabriel and to listen to him. Will you help me? Please?"

Luke smiled back and stood abruptly. His voice overrode all the other speakers as he said, "Right, medical orders. Angel, Jack and Gabriel are to be taken to the guest quarters on deck 2 where they are to be left to rest for twenty-four hours. Matt, Demon and Vya, you should go back to Whitestar Prime where Demon and Vya should also rest for the same period. Lily, I'd like to take you back to our quarters and you should take the same time for recuperation."

For a moment, Lily looked rebellious and she was about to protest when I saw John take her hand and squeeze it gently. I had no doubt that some form of mental communication had just passed from the Captain of the Excalibur to my littlest sister. Lily closed her mouth without speaking and Luke went on, "Alwyn and Sarah..." He gave a wry grin as he looked at the Mage and his wife, "Do whatever you think is appropriate."

I looked up just in time to see the smile on John's face as he said, "OK, people, you have your orders. Now follow them."

The next thing I knew, Jack had stooped and picked me up, carrying me to the door of the gym, with Gabriel following us closely. I asked Jack to stop briefly so I could speak to Alwyn. "Are you staying

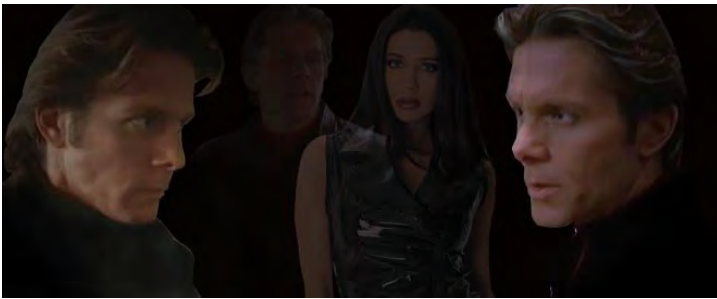
on board, Alwyn? I need to ask you something."

Alwyn nodded. "It is quicker for us to return to Minbar on the Excalibur. Most of the Mages will stay aboard until we return to our families at the Ranger Compound. We can speak tomorrow when you're feeling better. For now, go and rest."

Jack didn't hesitate. He carried me straight over to the doors and out of the gym. The two Marines stationed outside-a very large Narn and an equally large human-nodded as we exited, then one of them waved us to follow him, while the other followed us closely. Not a guard, of course, just an escort. If you believe that...

When we arrived at Matt and Demon's old quarters, Jack lowered me onto the couch, then went to the kitchen area and brought me a glass of water. He stood over me, frowning down at me as I sipped, gradually feeling myself getting back to normal. Gabriel perched himself on the edge of one of the dining chairs, looking as apprehensive as ever.

I pulled myself together and said, "Right. Let's get comfortable." I waved Gabriel to one of the armchairs. "This is a very long story, so we could be here for some time."



It was hours later before I finished the long story of my life, how I'd met Gabriel's father, how we'd come to have a child together-that part of the story I edited quite carefully-how and why I'd left, and how Jack and Matt were related to Gabriel.

I then encouraged Gabriel to tell me about his short life. It nearly broke my heart to hear of his abuse by the couple on Earth for the first ten years of his life and it made me angry to hear how grateful my son was to his father for 'rescuing' him from that abuse. I knew that the way Gabriel had been brought up had all been part of Lucas' plan to prepare him for the Rage.

Jack didn't say much while Gabriel and I told each other our life stories, but he listened as well as making regular visits to the kitchen area to prepare food and drinks for us all. Fortunately, the kitchen was well stocked which meant that either it was kept permanently that way or someone had moved very quickly indeed between the time we left the gym and when we arrived at the guest quarters.

By the time we finished talking it was late into the ship's night and we were all exhausted. I took Gabriel through to Marcus' old room. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I said to Gabriel, "It's been a lot to take in, I know. Try to get some sleep and tomorrow we'll talk about the future. We need to know what you want, Gabriel. I have some ideas, but it's what you want that's important. Just remember that you're my son, and I won't ever leave you again, if you want me in your life."

Gabriel said nothing and his expression gave nothing away so I rose to leave, feeling older and sadder than at any time in my life. I thought, "If this is what being an adult is like, then it sucks!"

I was completely exhausted when I entered the bedroom, where Jack was in bed, waiting for me. He reached out his arm and lifted the covers, gesturing for me to join him. I stripped my clothes off quickly, and dived in next to him, snuggling myself up against him and finally allowing myself to cry. I poured out to my husband everything that had happened on Lucas' ship, including how I had finally killed my nemesis.

Jack didn't say much. He just comforted me, kissing me, telling me how much he loved me and we made love until we were both too exhausted to stay awake.

31st July 2291

Marcus Cole

Sheriff Ignacio Valdes-known to the adults in the Draxis colony as Iggy and to the children as Sheriff Iggy-entered the station that morning as he had done for the previous five days, carrying my breakfast and his, both of which he'd collected from a local diner on his way in to his office. He also carried the lunch that his wife had packed for him every day, with an extra helping for me. Before he left in the evening, his wife came down to the station with a covered tray on which my hot dinner was brought to me.

Having sat in a cell for a week, eating like that every day, I was in danger of bursting out of my clothes before I worked out how to break out of my cell.

Not that I hadn't had opportunities to escape sooner. But every option I'd had involved hurting Iggy or one of his two deputies and I just couldn't bring myself to do that. Iggy was a lovely man, doing his job as best he could, upholding the law in a small community. Not that it required much upholding. The colonists of Draxis were a pretty law abiding bunch as far as I could tell.

During the week I'd been sitting in my cell, I'd only had one other jail companion, and that had been a young lady-well, perhaps lady is a bit of a stretch, although she was certainly young-who'd got drunk one afternoon and started offering her services to passers-by on the main street, while removing her clothing to show what she had to offer.

Iggy had placed her in the cell adjoining mine with a sad shake of his head, saying, "I'm just doing this for your own protection, Nelly. No one from the colony will take advantage of you, but sometimes those miners come into town, and there's no knowing what they might get up to. Once you've sobered up, I'll call your parents to come get you."

The Sheriff was a short man of medium build, with dark hair, liquid brown eyes, a magnificent moustache and one of the worst cases of acne scarring I'd ever seen. In the course of my rather comfortable confinement I'd learned a lot from Iggy about how Draxis operated.

It was very clearly split between the colonists and the miners. Mostly they each kept to their own areas; the colonists in the town and the miners in their barracks and the bar/casino/brothel that was kept up in the woods for their entertainment. Its official name was The Miners' Arms, but the colonists called it The Minors' Harm.

The sheriff had mixed feelings about the bar. On the one hand it kept the miners out of town, which in his eyes was a good thing. But it also attracted some of the younger colonists and that didn't sit well with him. Nor was he happy about the conditions of employment of some of the young people who worked in the place. He wasn't entirely convinced that they were all there of their own free will. He'd shaken his head sadly when we'd discussed the continued existence of slavery in some parts of the galaxy. It was technically illegal on Draxis, but Iggy had his doubts.

You can probably tell that Iggy and I had got quite friendly during the week I'd been his 'guest'. He worked the day shift, overlapping with his deputies who worked the evening until midnight, then from midnight until morning. Given that none of them were very busy during their working hours, we'd had lots of time to chat.

Chatting is something I'm rather good at, but I'm also very good at listening.

I'd learned a lot about Connor Black from Iggy and his deputies. How he owned pretty much everything of any value in town and most of the farms as well as the mines. How he took care of his people and was generous when the colonists needed help-as for example after the recent attack on the colony-but how he could be hard on anyone who didn't do things the way he wanted.

Over the week of chats with Iggy and the others, a fuller picture of how Lucas Buck/Connor Black operated had emerged, and I began to understand him better. He wasn't an outwardly violent man, but preferred to use a web of blackmail and 'favors' to get people to do what he wanted. He worked hard to make sure that everyone owed him something. But a surprisingly high proportion of people who resisted him either died in 'accidents' or disappeared mysteriously. The presence of some rather nasty wild animals in the woods surrounding the colony seemed to provide a convenient excuse for these disappearances.

I'd made sure I also got everyone talking as much as possible about the attack on the colony, which struck me as being rather an odd affair. If the attackers had been Raiders, they would have followed up by landing to steal everything not nailed down, and killing everyone who got in their way. In this case, after the initial attack, everything had gone quiet. No follow up whatsoever. That was definitely not the Raiders' way of doing things.

The description of the ships that had attacked the colony was also interesting. The configurations were not typical for Raiders. They actually sounded more like Drakh fighters, which was worrying to say the least. What were the Drakh doing in this part of the galaxy? The Drazi and Centauri would be very unhappy to find Drakh lurking around their borders.

Once young Nelly had sobered up, she'd also told me an interesting story about the night of the attack. She'd been at Connor Black's house with his twelve year old son, Gabriel, and had spent the night there before returning to her own home in the morning. The news that Lucas Buck had his son living with him on Draxis left me breathless.

This was the son that Angel had carried and given birth to; the son she'd been forced to leave behind when she'd fled from Lucas. I knew that once I was able to get a message through to my Entil'Zha, the Rangers would descend on Draxis like a swarm of locusts to make sure that Angel's son was returned to her.

But my hopes were dashed when a few days after my capture the sheriff mentioned casually in passing that Connor Black had left the planet, taking his son with him. Iggy didn't know the reasons for Buck's departure, nor how long he was likely to be gone, only that he'd left on a trader ship, with Gabriel as his travelling companion.

I was devastated. Had my presence and discovery provoked Buck's leaving? Had he taken his son into hiding again, knowing that I would reveal his whereabouts to Angel as soon as I could?

This was yet another reason for me to question why Buck hadn't killed me at once. Surely he would have wanted to be certain I couldn't take news of him and his son back to Minbar? He'd said, "There's a war coming sometime soon, and I know who I think is going to win, but if I'm wrong, it won't hurt to have a couple of chips to bargain with." But was it really worth the risk of me escaping and bringing the wrath of the Rangers down on his head, just to hold a potential bargaining chip? And what war was he talking about? When I'd left Minbar, the situation had been tense, but there'd been no mention of an all-out war.

As soon as I'd heard about Lucas' departure I'd started to chivvy Iggy along in a polite, affable way to investigate the charges 'Black' had laid against me, as well as Mal Fillion's whereabouts. The sheriff had resisted my pestering initially, but after I'd been sitting in his cells for nearly a full week, he finally came to talk to me about it.



Juggling the packages containing our breakfasts in one hand, he lifted a chair and brought it over, placing it directly in front of the bars to my cell. He placed one package on the floor next to his chair, then pushed the other parcel through the bars towards me. Having collected it, I went to sit on the bench in my cell that also acted as my bed, and unwrapped my breakfast. Two thickly cut sandwiches, filled with crispy bacon and fried eggs, sent a delicious aroma wafting around the station.

Iggy had gone back to his desk and brought over two large mugs of coffee, one of which he handed to me through the bars. I could easily have overpowered him at this point, but as I said, not without hurting him badly, and I just wasn't willing to do that. So I took the coffee and returned to my bench, starting to eat my breakfast with gusto as Iggy returned to the chair he'd brought over and did the same.

The only sounds in the station for a while were the munching of food and slurping of coffee. I would have preferred a nice cup of English Breakfast tea, but beggars-and prisoners-can't be choosers.

When he'd finished eating, Iggy patted his luxuriant moustache with a napkin, gave a very gentle burp, then started speaking. "I had a long chat with Kusum Patel last night." Patel was the manager who'd taken Mal and me on to work in the mines. "She told me they'd finished the audit they carried out after you were brought in here."

I knew this would be interesting. Lucas Buck had told the sheriff that I'd been caught stealing from the mines. Had he had time to plant appropriate evidence to support his accusation? I hoped not.

"Really? And what did they find?" I kept my tone light and cheery, hoping that this was what Iggy would expect from an innocent man.

"Nothing." The sheriff frowned as he spoke, obviously unhappy about what he had to say. "They found nothing to indicate that anything had been taken from the mines or anywhere else. Kusum didn't know anything about any 'thefts' until I told her that Connor had made the charges and had you brought in here late last Friday. The office people at the mine don't work weekends and Connor left early on Monday before he could speak to Kusum about anything. When I called her on Monday morning to tell her we were holding you, she started an audit to identify what was missing. They finished yesterday evening, so she called me at home last night."

Iggy stood and pulled a set of keys from his belt, then walked over to my cell and unlocked the door. "I'm really sorry about this, Mr. Bowles." We'd been calling each other Parker and Iggy all week, so the new formality showed how distressed he was about my false imprisonment.

"It's Parker, and it wasn't your fault, Iggy. Just a misunderstanding I'm sure." There was no point in making accusations against 'Connor Black' at this stage, when I had no evidence to back them up. There were more important things to worry about.

I left my cell and shook Iggy's hand to show there were no hard feelings, then asked, "Has anyone heard anything about my husband, Sal?" I'd asked Iggy about Mal several times during the week, but he'd had no news, only saying that my 'husband' had disappeared from the mine the same day that I'd been brought in.

Iggy held onto my hand and used it to steer me to the chair that he'd replaced next to his desk. "I think you should sit down, Parker. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

He told me that Mal's badly decomposed body had been found floating just outside the harbor early that morning, when the colony's small fleet had returned from a night's fishing. Mal had been naked and unrecognizable, but his body had been identified when they'd done a DNA match against the database on which all employees of the mine were required to register.

"He's in a pretty bad state, so we're not sure of cause of death right now, but it looks as if he may have fallen from the cliffs. There's a lot of broken bones, and it looks as if maybe he's lost an ear, but that could be the fish. They had... well, no need to go into detail. His body is up at the hospital morgue."

I closed my eyes and sent a silent prayer for Mal's soul. He'd been a good friend and he'd deserved a better death than that. I knew Matthew would blame himself for Mal's loss, as he blamed himself for every death on his watch. But that was the Ranger's job. We walk in the dark places no other will enter...

I vowed to hunt down Lucas Buck's associate, Boyle, and make him pay for what he'd done to Mal. And right after that I was going after Lucas Buck himself. I now had a double debt to make him pay for.

Iggy was silent, respecting my stillness, which to him was that of a man grieving for his husband. After a few moments, he said quietly, "There's a Drazi trader called Droshan who's been asking after

you and Fillioni since he got here a couple of days back. He says he's got messages for you. Shall I let him know you're here?"

I took a deep breath and shook my head. "If you can tell me where he's staying, I'll go and see him myself. And I'd also be grateful if you could point me in the direction of the local funeral director. I'll need to make arrangements to take Sal home."

I could have had Mal cremated on Draxis, but I decided that I'd rather take him back to Minbar, where he would be given full Ranger funeral rites. Such ceremonies were rather long, as are all Minbari rituals, but intensely moving and I felt Mal deserved it, for the loyal service he'd given the Rangers for so many years. I also knew that Angel, Matthew and Demon would want to attend the obsequies, although I had no doubt that Matthew would complain bitterly about having to wear his full Entil'Zha uniform for the occasion.

In the meantime I needed to see Droshan and find out what had been happening in the galaxy while I'd been confined on Draxis. For all I knew, there might not be a Minbar to go back to.

Angelique Gideon

We woke late and I felt refreshed and happy again. Making love to Jack, I knew that as long as we were together, I could face whatever life threw at me. We stayed in bed, snuggling in each others' arms, and we talked again about what had happened on Lucas' ship the day before. Jack held me as I wept again, saying nothing, even though he knew I was weeping for the death of another man.

I think he understood that I was grieving not just for Lucas, but for that part of myself that had died with him. I was grieving for the loss of the girl I'd been before I met Lucas and for the woman he'd made me grow into. I was no longer that woman. I was now my own person, making my own decisions, and Jack had helped me become that person. But I still grieved for the thoughtless, careless girl I'd once been.

When we finished showering and dressing, and once Jack had shaved his beard off, as I'd begged him to do-there's only so much beard burn a girl can take!-we went into the living area to find Gabriel up and dressed, his head in the refrigerator, looking for food. He stood and glowered, "There's nothing for breakfast."

I laughed. "We cleaned the refrigerator out last night. Let's go down to the mess hall."

Our 'escort' was waiting outside and followed us down to the nearest refectory. It was long past breakfast time for the rest of the ship, but the cooks were kind enough to put something together for us, and we sat at a table there to eat. All the time I could see Gabriel's eyes roving around the room, looking at all the different crewmembers sitting there. Some were eating and drinking, some chatting, some just sitting quietly reading, but I suspect there were more different species in that room than Gabriel had ever seen in his life before.

When we got back to our quarters, the three of us sat and discussed what Gabriel's options for the future were. It came down to three possibilities:

Return to Draxis and live there in his father's house, under the care of a guardian;

Go back to Earth or perhaps Mars and attend a boarding school of some kind, as Marcus and Mattie had, while visiting Draxis and/or me and Jack in school vacations;

Live with me and Jack, on Serenity for the moment, but eventually on Earth.

The previous night I'd cried again in bed when Jack had assured me that he was willing to take on Gabriel and let him live with us. He'd told me that he had no idea if he could be a father to my son, but that he was sure he could try and look out for him, if that would be enough. It reminded me again just why I loved my husband so much.

We went round and round the options a few times, then I called the discussion to a halt, saying, "We don't need to decide this now. It's a three day trip back to Minbar, so we still have a couple of days to think about things. Let's just spend some time getting to know each other."

So that's what we did. Jack and I showed Gabriel around the Excalibur, even including a trip into the bullet car tubes to admire the motor bike there. We ate one meal with John, Luke and Lily and another with Alwyn and Sarah on their ship.

I spent several hours with John and Matt going over what had happened during my trips to Lucas' ship and providing them with information about the ship, its Captain and its crew. Apparently the Whitestars had found the ship-which I now learned was called the Circe-hiding behind one of the moons in the Coriana VI system, and had taken her under escort.

They told me they would decide what to do with Captain Afolayan and his crew when they arrived at Minbar. I put in a plea for leniency, telling Matt about Afolayan's kindness to me and to Gabriel after Lucas had died. Matt assured me that he would make sure that the Circe's Captain and crew were treated fairly, and I made a silent vow to make certain Matt kept his word.

I'd also had to tell Matt about the loss of Mal Fillion. It hadn't been easy to watch the pain in Matt's eyes as he realized he'd sent another good man to his death. But at least I'd been able to tell him that Marcus Cole was safe-or at least had been a few days earlier-in a cell on Draxis. Matt had confirmed that he'd send a ship to pick Marcus up and collect whatever we needed of Gabriel's belongings.

Gabriel had slowly relaxed and even began to smile occasionally. I knew I couldn't repair the damage done by his father in a few days, but it was good to feel that we'd made a start. Now there was just one thing that I needed to do before we arrived on Minbar.

It was our last day on board the Excalibur, and Jack had taken Gabriel down to the gym to play basketball. The map table had been disassembled and moved back to the bridge, so the court was open again. They'd asked me to join them but I'd waved them away, telling them it was far too energetic for me, and I needed to rest. As soon as they left, I called Alwyn and asked if I could see him alone.

We met on his ship, in his control room, which looked so much like an old-fashioned library. Once we were settled, with me curled up in a large, comfortable armchair, Alwyn leaned forward and looked at me closely. "What can I do for you, Angel?" He had assumed his more elderly appearance, making him seem more kindly and fatherly than he sometimes did.

I took a deep breath. "I don't know if you can help me, Alwyn, but I'm hoping that you and the other Technomages might be able to." I hesitated for a moment, biting my lip, then plunged on, "What I did at Coriana VI was terrifying. No one should have that sort of power, Alwyn. I know they were the enemy and they would have destroyed us if they could, but..."

I ran out of words and looked at Alwyn, pleadingly. He nodded slowly. "I understand. It was too easy, wasn't it, Angel? That sort of destruction shouldn't be easy; it should be hard and painful, to remind us that life has value and that destroying life of any kind should be an effort."



I nodded in relief. "That's right. I wasn't sure you'd understand. I believe that killing is evil and only evil people kill easily. And I don't want to be evil, Alwyn, I don't!" I started to sob and shake. This had been running through my head for days. What had I become? How could I have killed tens of thousands of sentient beings with just the breath of my lungs and a wave of my hand?

I felt Alwyn's arms wrap around me and he rocked me gently. I'd never had a father to comfort me when I was a child, but it suddenly came to me that this was what it must be like to be a child held in a loving father's arms, and it felt good.

He said nothing, just held me, making soothing noises, and I gradually became aware that there were two voices comforting me. I looked up and saw Ishtar settled on Alwyn's shoulder, crooning softly, her eyes whirling slowly, filled with concern.

I sniffed and laughed. "Thank you, Ishtar. And you, Alwyn. Thank you for listening and understanding."

Alwyn sat back and smiled at me. "You are very welcome, my dear. And please be assured that you are not an evil person. No evil person would be so affected by what they had been forced to do."

He leaned forward and took my chin in his hand, looking me very closely in the eyes. "And also be assured that you had no choice. The forces of evil were ranged against us and if they had won, the galaxy would have been plunged into a darkness that would have lasted for a thousand years. Yes, you and the merge killed thousands of sentient beings, but they were not innocents. They had chosen to fight, wanting to kill everything that is light and good in this galaxy. By defeating them you have saved millions, perhaps billions of innocent beings who would otherwise have suffered and died."

I wiped my tears away and sniffed again, saying quietly, "Thank you. That helps. A bit."

Alwyn nodded. "Good. Now, what is it you want my help with?"

I took another deep breath. "I want you to bind my powers, Alwyn. I never want to be able to take part in the merge again. I never want to lead it. I never want to use the darkness inside me for any reason, good or bad, ever in my life again."

1st August 2291

Alwyn

After Angel left me I spent hours in my ship, thinking, planning, working out what needed to be done next and whom I needed to do it. It seemed that although the immediate crisis was over, I could not stop playing the role of spider at the center of the web, tugging threads here and there, weaving my net, making sure that everything went as I planned.

Would I ever be able to stop this game? Would I ever be able to step aside and let someone else shoulder this burden? I was honest enough to realize that I enjoyed the game too much to ever stop playing with people's lives. After so many centuries, retirement and relaxation were just not options for this devious, meddling, old Mage.

I had tried a quiet retirement on Regula IV many years before, but I have to admit that even before the Excalibur had arrived and changed my plans, I had grown bored with inactivity. In the twenty plus years that had passed since leaving that quiet colony, I had enjoyed my life much more, and not just because of the companionship of my beloved Sarah and our son.

In the immediate aftermath of the battle at Coriana VI, I had mourned the loss of so many of my order. They had gone willingly to the darkness, but there had still been many who had been my friends during my long life, and I would miss them sorely. There had been few enough Technomages remaining before the split. Now our numbers were even further reduced, and as we had no way of replacing our losses, the order would probably disappear within a century or so. Sometimes I wondered if this was entirely a bad thing.

At times I look back and see my life as the sum of my losses and I wonder how many more I can survive. I remember my beloved Paedrig, whose death had sent me into mourning for centuries, a grief from which I had only recovered when I met my Sarah. How will I go on when the time comes to say goodbye to my wife? I shook that thought aside and went back to thinking about the associates I had lost.

I also had to give thought to their families. Where had they been hidden? Five of my colleagues had left the Excalibur on their ships to try to find the surviving families and bring them back to the Technomage home-world. They could not be left in ignorance of the deaths of their loved ones and they would need protection and support from the few of us that remained in our order. That obligation could not be ignored.

The fate of the ISA and in particular the action to be taken in relation to the Centauri, I gladly left to President Delenn and the Entil'Zha. Yes, it may surprise you that I was willing to trust Matthew Gideon with that great responsibility, but despite his many shortcomings, his judgement of people is

usually sound-especially when he listens to his wife. In any case, Delenn would be making the most important decisions and I had entrusted her with the guidance of the ISA for many years.

So now my remaining task was to see what assistance, if any, I could provide to Angel. And there I was in a quandary. I was unsure whether I should help her or not.

While I entirely understood her desire to be rid of the powers that she held, and her wish to never again be placed in the position of deciding the fate of thousands of lives, could we really afford to lose the weapon she represented? Was I sure enough of how the future would evolve to relinquish the power of the merge? Was I sure it would never be needed again within the Witches' lifetimes?

All the information available to me-and it was extensive-indicated that now the Drakh and their allies had been destroyed, the ISA could develop in peace for many years to come. There were no imminent threats beyond their borders. The only dangers likely to develop in the next few decades were internal and political-not something the merge was designed to counter. So perhaps it was time to let go of the doomsday weapon the Vorlons had created for their own use and then abandoned when they went beyond the rim.

But what if there were perils that I could not foresee? Could we really afford to let our strongest weapon be dismantled on the assumption that we were safe? But then again, could I justify denying the peace of mind that Angel so dearly desired, just on the basis of 'what if'?

Having argued myself in circles, I finally came to the conclusion that the definite well-being of one person had to have more weight than the vague possibility of future perils for many, as I could not in any way quantify those dangers. I had to give Angel the help that she needed, if I were able.

That, however, was a big 'if'. Angel wanted me to 'bind' her powers, to make them inaccessible to her, but what did that really mean? We would have to find a way to block her access to those parts of her brain that allowed her to draw on the powers of darkness that surround us all. I wasn't even sure that such a block was possible. I would need to consult my Seeker colleagues who may have such knowledge.

But I also knew that there was another person on board the Excalibur who might have the abilities that I needed. Someone who Angel had not considered, who might be able to help her. So I pushed myself out of my comfortable armchair and left my ship, making my way to the Excalibur's Captain's quarters.

It didn't take long for me to confirm what I suspected. If I could combine the skills we had available to us, with certain somewhat esoteric and arcane knowledge I suspected the Seekers of my order held, we should be able to carry out Angel's wishes. Leaving the Captain's quarters, I made my way to the landing bay, where my remaining colleagues were living on their ships during the trip back to Minbar. Having sent a silent message ahead, they were waiting for me when I arrived and we joined in convocation.

The Technomage convocation is a way of us linking together to share knowledge and skills. This is the method we use to solve problems that we have in common. Once assembled, I laid out the challenge to the Mages, adding details of the additional help that would be available to us.

Some of my colleagues were doubtful that we could achieve the end we sought, and even more doubtful that we should try, but Synnove and her partner-a Seeker named Eldrida-spoke out in favor of my proposals. They had always been an influential couple within the Mage circle, and the addition of their support swung the majority around to my point of view.

It was one of my quieter associates, Heolstor, who provided the knowledge we needed. It had been a pleasant surprise to me when he had joined us in support of the ISA, as he had always been one of the Seekers who had been intrigued with the powers of the Shadows and had studied them for years. I had expected Heolstor to join those of the Mages who went to support the servants of our old masters but he'd surprised me by joining the forces of light.

He now explained that it was the results of his researches that had turned him against the darkness, as it had shown him that the path of darkness led only to entropy and chaos. So now he was willing to add his knowledge to the group, which together with the outside skills which I now knew were available to us, should be sufficient to give Angel what she needed.

Thanking my fellow Mages, I returned to my ship and called Angel, telling her that we would convene in the Ranger Training Center when we returned to Minbar, and there we would attempt to provide her with the solution she desired. I could only hope that the outcome gave her the peace of mind she so desperately needed.

3rd August 2291

Jack Gideon

*It felt good to be back on board Serenity. We'd returned to Minbar and our ship the previous day and had quickly settled back into the comfort of our home. The quarters allocated to us on the Excalibur had been comfortable enough, but it was really *really* good to get back to our own bed.*

We'd left the Excalibur in orbit above Minbar, transferring to White Star Prime for the journey down to the Ranger compound. Angelique and I had taken Gabriel to Prime's map room and looked down at the planet from orbit before we made our descent. It's a beautiful planet, very Earthlike in appearance but with a greater ratio of water to land, and the land more evenly distributed than Earth.

As we'd watched through the transparent walls of the map room, two Sharlin class war-cruisers had rounded the horizon of the planet, joining the White Star fleet. These ships had once been the most powerful in the galaxy and even now, only the Excalibur and the new White Stars outgunned them.



I couldn't help but remember a time in my own universe when I'd seen so many of these ships battered and destroyed by the Drakh and their allies. It was hard to believe that all those enemies had now been eliminated in this version of reality.

The White Stars had soon peeled away from the Minbari ships and we'd started to make our entry through the planet's atmosphere. Watching this from inside the ship, through walls that didn't appear to exist, had been a somewhat unnerving experience for a man who had once been left to hang in space to die alone, but we'd soon come into land at the Ranger space port and made our way from Prime over to Serenity.

Angelique and I had given Gabriel a tour of our ship before settling him into his own private quarters, then retreating to our own rooms for a period of privacy and relaxation. Well, that's what I choose to call it, especially when there are minors on board.

As Angelique and I had relaxed in the aftermath of a vigorous workout in the hot, soapy water of our tub, I'd thought over what I'd seen of Gabriel over the previous few days. This boy was now something like a step-son to me, so I wanted to get to know him. I didn't have much experience of twelve year old boys, other than the vague memory of being one myself and of having watched some of the antics of Angelique's nephews. Neither the remembrance of my own activities at that age, nor my recollections of Marcus' and Dasha's behavior, was particularly reassuring.

However, what was obvious from the start was that Gabriel behaved very differently to how both Marcus and Dasha had at that age. And we won't go into what I'd got up to at that time. No, you really don't want to know, I promise you. Let's just say that had Grandpa and Grandma Gideon known half of what I'd done, they would have fainted dead away.

Gabriel was much quieter, watchful and wary, rarely speaking unless he was asked a direct question. I remember when Marcus was twelve it had been difficult to shut him up! Even Dasha, a quieter character, had been more forthcoming than Gabriel. But then both boys had been brought up in comfort and surrounded by love. Gabriel had received neither.

As a result of his upbringing on Earth and the harsh conditions he'd endured, he was physically strong, but wiry. Luke had carried out a full medical examination of the boy on the Excalibur and had told us that he would probably grow to a similar height to me and Matt, and would have a comparable lean physique. He would never be a heavy weight. Luke had also told us about the scars that Gabriel bore on his back, which appeared to have come from being whipped as a child, as well as marks on his arms and legs. He'd not been treated well when he was younger.

Angelique had wept again at this evidence of how her son had been abused and we both swore that we would make his life better from now on. The problem was that we were still undecided how best to achieve that.

Before we left the Excalibur, Gabriel had made himself familiar with the library of books and entertainments available, and from that point onwards, it had been hard to get him out of his room. He'd told us that when he'd arrived on Draxis he could barely read or write, but he'd been learning everything he could ever since then.

From what I could gather the boy had a brain like a sponge and he absorbed every scrap of information that came his way. He didn't speak much because he was too busy watching and learning. After leaving Earth two years before, his universe had expanded in a way he'd never thought possible, and he'd been determined to seize every opportunity to learn what he could.

When we'd shown him to his room on Serenity, we'd demonstrated the library access system and left him to it, secure in the knowledge that as long as he had books to read, he wouldn't stray far. Nevertheless, we'd put a lock on the ship's exits, just to ensure he didn't wander without our being aware.

After Angelique and I finally dragged ourselves out of our bath, Gabriel had joined us and the crew for dinner for our first evening back on board, then he'd gone back to his room, telling us he wanted to carry on reading. Before he'd left, I'd asked him what subjects interested him most, and he'd paused, watching me carefully before answering. I'd wondered if he was trying to work out what answer would please me most, or whether he just didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth.

After a long silence he'd said, "People interest me. I like to watch them, see how they behave, what makes them happy and what makes them angry. I needed to learn that to survive back on Earth. And even when my father rescued me, I had to watch him. He could have funny moods at times. So I watch people to make sure they're not going to hurt me."

It was the longest statement Gabriel had come out with since he'd joined us. Angelique had leaned forward at the table and taken his hand, but I'd noticed he'd flinched slightly, and only accepted her touch with reluctance. She'd said softly, "No one is going to hurt you here, Gabriel. Jack and I will make sure of that."

The boy had looked from Angelique to me and back and after a moment, nodded, then carefully withdrew his hand. He'd muttered, "OK," then asked, "Can I go back to my room now?"

Angelique had smiled again, and said, "Of course," but her face had fallen as she'd watched him leave. She'd turned to me when he'd gone and whispered, "Oh Jack, how are we going to fix all the damage that's been done to him? Do you think we can?"

I'd smiled back at her, taken her hands in mine and said as confidently as I knew how, "Yes, of course we can. It'll take time, but we'll teach him how to trust us and we'll help him in every way possible."

As we'd walked back to our quarters I'd told myself I was just glad that Angelique wasn't an empath like her sister, or she'd have sensed my doubts. Then Angelique and I had gone back to our quarters, made love, and talked long into the night.

That night, Angelique had told me about her desire to be rid of her powers. I wasn't sure whether this was the wisest course of action and I worried that she would miss her abilities if she gave them up but she seemed determined. So I'd told her that I would support her in whatever decision she made, and I meant every word.

After a good night's sleep back in our own bed, my wife and I breakfasted late then went to find Gabriel. He was in his room, engrossed in reading something that looked like a law textbook. I thought it looked a little advanced for him, but couldn't see that it could do any harm. But we weren't going to let him sit in his room all day, so we roused him out and took him with us outside.

It was a beautiful day, with blue skies, a bright sun and a fresh breeze blowing through the beautiful landscaping of the Ranger compound. Standing outside our ship, breathing the fresh air

deep into my lungs, enjoying the feel of sunlight on my face, I concluded that it was definitely time to settle down planet-side. I'd spent too many years breathing canned air and having only artificial lights over my head. It was time for a change.

Marcus and Vya were waiting for us on the landing field, and Marcus welcomed us back to Minbar. He made a point of including Gabriel in his greeting, telling him that as his cousin, he would be acting as his personal guide for the day and had a tour of the Ranger compound planned.

Marcus then swept Gabriel away with him, leaving us with Vya, who was wearing his usual anonymous human shape. I wondered if Gabriel had realized that this was yet another cousin, but that this one wasn't human. Just more information we needed to impart to Angelique's son.

After Marcus and Gabriel left, Vya turned to us and said, "Alwyn and the Mages are waiting at the Training Center. Aunt Demon is there, too, but Uncle Matt has got tied up with Anla'Shok business so won't be able to join us."



We followed him to the large building and entered, leaving the bright sunlight behind us as we went into the main hall. Sure enough, Alwyn, Demon and the Technomages were all assembled there, waiting for us, but much to my surprise, John and Lily were also present.

Angelique flew from my side-and I mean that quite literally-to join her sisters, and they instantly joined hands, closed eyes, and linked minds. I smiled as I watched them, but worried about how my wife was going to give up this close connection to her sisters. Pushing my concerns aside, I moved to join John, who was also smiling as he watched the sisters.

Shaking hands with him, I said, "I hadn't realized you were coming down. I assume you know what Angelique has planned? Are you helping with this in some way, John?"

John shook his head. "Not helping, no. But Lily did tell us what Angel had planned. Are you sure this is the right thing for her to do? I mean, giving up her powers, is a big step. I may not use my telepathy very often, but to give it up..." My old Lieutenant trailed off, shaking his head again.

I shrugged in response. "She's made up her mind that this is what she wants, and they're her powers, so I haven't even tried to dissuade her. But I do worry that she'll miss the link to her sisters. Then again, they haven't been able to link for months now, so maybe it won't be so much of a wrench."

At that moment, Alwyn drew our attention by striking his staff on the floor. Angelique broke away from her sisters and came back to join me. I could see Lily was in tears, and Demon's face was a frozen mask, the face she wears when she is locking herself down, refusing to show how she is feeling. But it was obvious to anyone who knew her well that she was deeply distressed.

My attention was drawn back to Alwyn as he said, "Let us begin. Angel, Lily, will you take your places, please?"

Much to my astonishment, it wasn't John who joined Angelique and the Mages, but Lily. She took her place with her sister in the center of the circle made by the Technomages and again reached out her hands.

I turned to John to ask him what was going on, but before I could speak, he said quietly, "Alwyn thinks they can use Lily's telepathic blocking abilities to help them block Angel's access to her powers."

My surprise must have shown as he went on, "Lily's ability to block telepaths is really quite extraordinary. At one time, she managed to block over one hundred teeps who came on board the Excalibur, along with four Joneses. Alwyn told us that one of his order has some knowledge of the way the Shadows accessed the powers of darkness, which will help Lily block Angel, and make the block permanent. I guess we're about to find out if it will work."

I'm not even going to attempt to describe what happened during the next half hour or so. Lights, chanting, force fields that made our hair stand on end, the whole nine yards. And all the time, Demon stood alone, watching, her face frozen, in full Ice Queen mode. I knew she must be distraught at the loss of her link to her sister; I wished I could comfort her in some way and I wondered how Matt could have allowed her to go through this alone.

But I was torn between wanting to help Demon, and the need to watch Angelique carefully to make sure she didn't come to harm. And when given a choice between my wife and anyone else in the universe, Angelique always comes first.

Finally, the light show ended and the chanting died away. The field surrounding Lily and Angelique dissipated, and at last I was able to go to my wife, to hold her, support her, make sure she knew I was there for her. John went to Lily, and held her closely as she wept again, mourning the loss of the mental link to her sister; the link they had held since they'd first been abducted by the Vorlon.

Angelique leaned her head against me, taking ragged breaths as she fought to bring herself under control. Eventually, she looked up at me and gave me a tremulous smile. "It worked, Jack," she said, "It's gone. I can't draw on that power any more, I can't move anything with my mind, I can't teleport and I can't link to my sisters. I'll never be able to hurt anyone again."

Then she looked over at where Demon still stood alone and she cried out, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Demon. I know you had the strength to carry the burden of the merge for so long, but I just couldn't do it anymore. Can you ever forgive me?"

Demon closed her eyes and for a moment, the pain she felt was clearly written on her features. Then she took a deep breath, opened her eyes and gave Angelique a strained smile. "There's nothing to forgive, darling. You've done what you needed to do. You know I'll always support you and help you when I can. But please, forgive me, if I'm just a little sad for a while. I'm going to miss linking to my little sister."

Angelique threw herself across the room at her sister. Demon opened her arms and took my wife into a tender embrace, stroking her hair, and soothing her like a small child. I watched for a moment, wondering where Demon found the strength to comfort Angelique when she was so obviously in need of comfort herself.

I discovered the answer to that when the doors were flung open and Matt stormed in. Angelique stepped back and let him sweep Demon into his arms, and the tall blonde finally gave way to the storm of emotion she'd been holding back. And every one in that room felt the full weight of her loss and grief until she brought herself under control.

Angelique came back to my side. I took her into my arms again, and said quietly, "Let's go. Let's go to Earth and find ourselves somewhere to live. And let's persuade Gabriel to come with us and start again. It's time for a fresh start."

We said hurried goodbyes to Matt and Demon, to John and Lily, then we left. Marcus and Gabriel were waiting outside, sitting on a bench in the afternoon sun. As soon as we emerged, Marcus stood and asked, "All done then? I think Gabriel has had a good time, haven't you?"



Gabriel nodded, then thanked Marcus politely and started to walk back towards the landing field. Angelique hurried to catch him up but before I could follow, Marcus caught my arm and said quietly, "Just a quick word, Uncle Jack?"

He paused, watching until Gabriel and Angelique had moved out of earshot, then turned to me, his face grave as he said, "Be careful, Jack. Gabriel has a lot of hatred, anger and resentment buried very deep inside him. He's not easy to read, even for an empath, but what I can pick up makes me wary. Just be careful, OK?" And with that he gave me a quick nod, span on his heel and left.

Now what the hell am I supposed to do about that?

Matthew Gideon

The three day trip back from Coriana VI to Minbar had been nearly as busy as the trip out. The aftermath of the battle had left the ISA in a state of shock. One of the first things I'd done was to send Braknar and a group of ten White Stars to Centauri Prime, to find out what the hell was going on there. Losing pretty much their entire fleet as well as their new Emperor, when he was still bright and shiny, barely used out of the box, would no doubt have left some feathers-or in the case of the Centauri, hair crests-very ruffled indeed.

Most of the repercussions were political and those fell within Delenn's remit, but she'd need intelligence and that was the Rangers' job. So while most of the White Stars were sent back to their stations around the ISA, ten went to Centauri Prime, and the remainder accompanied White Star Prime, the Excalibur and the Minbari fleet back to Minbar. Except for one ship; I sent Andy Benson's White Star off to Draxis, to retrieve Marcus Cole and recover Mal Fillion's remains, if they could be found.

Messages were flying back and forth to the Rangers' HQ as well as to the ISA; Deborah, Trulann and I could barely keep abreast of it all. And I also interviewed-OK interrogated-Captain Afolayan of the Circe. Deborah joined me for that interview, as she's the best lie detector I've ever come across.

Afolayan turned out to be a real find. His criminal record mostly related to smuggling, but he seemed to have avoided drugs and weapons, which could have got him sentenced to death of personality in most of the ISA. The only people he'd really pissed off were the Centauri, who'd put a price on his head after a run-in he'd had on one of their colonies. He gave us his side of the story, which Deborah confirmed was essentially truthful, and I decided that I didn't give a damn what the Centauri wanted anyway.

So we did a deal whereby Afolayan gave us extensive information on the Raiders bases and activities, in exchange for immunity for all previous crimes committed in the ISA. Then I suggested he should contact Jack to see what legitimate shipping work might be available for a ship like the Circe.

Not that I ever believed all Jack's business was completely above board and legal. He's a version of me, after all. He and Afolayan would make a good team. And as for the crew of the Circe... I couldn't see Jack complaining too much about having to visit them occasionally, although Angel might have some objections.

By the time we got back to Minbar, Deborah and I were both tired and looking forward to a few quiet days at home. I'd arranged an interview with Delenn for the morning after we got back, but other than that, it was back to business as usual at the Ranger compound, for a while at least.

But as we walked down the ramp from Prime to the landing field, I heard my name called in an unmistakable voice and accent. I turned to see Marcus Cole racing across the field towards us, waving his arms above his head as he ran.

"Matthew! Entil'Zha! Good to see you!"

Marcus thrust out his hand as he arrived in front of us and I grasped it and shook it firmly. Before either of us could speak further, Marcus found himself wrapped up in my wife's arms as she hugged him fiercely, saying, "Marcus, we've been really worried about you. How did you escape from Draxis? Why didn't you send any messages?"

Marcus disentangled himself but before he could reply, I interrupted. "Just answer that last question for the moment, Marcus. I'll need a full debriefing later."

Nodding enthusiastically, Marcus said, "Yes, of course. Droshan's ship had a complete melt-down of their long range comms system. We only arrived in Minbar space an hour ago. Space traffic control told us that you were on your way in, so I thought I might as well wait until I saw you to let you know what I've been up to. I've got some bad news though. Mal..."

I waved him to silence. "We know about Fillion. You can tell me all about it later. Let's meet up in my office in two hours. That'll give you time to see your wives, while Deborah and I can see the children and Jean-Luc. We'll have supper ready when you arrive. Now just give me a chance to get out of this godawful uniform and into some comfortable clothes."

Marcus nodded but before I could leave, he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to put the uniform back on again soon enough, Entil'Zha. I have Mal's body in storage on Droshan's ship. We need to arrange a funeral."

That was a surprise. I hadn't realized Marcus had been able to recover Fillion's body and made a mental note to get a message to Andy Benson. I turned to Trulann, who'd stood quietly at my shoulder the whole time we'd been talking. "Can you make arrangements for Fillion's body to be taken to the Chapel? We can hold the funeral there at sunset tomorrow."

The Chapel is what the human Rangers call the small Minbari temple that is situated in the Ranger compound. It's a simple stone building, with beautiful, multi-hued windows that ring the top part of the temple's dome and break the sunlight into fragments that create spectacular patterns of color on the floor. The silence inside is broken only by the songs of the temshwee-small birdlike flying creatures-and the tinkling of wind chimes, creating a sense of peace and tranquility. It's the place the Rangers use for most of their spiritual ceremonies.

As far as I knew, Mal Fillion hadn't been a particularly spiritual man, but his friends and colleagues would be comforted by a formal ceremony of some kind. And Marcus was correct; I would have to put the uniform I loathed back on again.

Trulann nodded and murmured, "Leave it with me, Entil'Zha. I will make the necessary arrangements." A good Exec is like a virtuous woman in the bible; s/he has a value far above rubies.

So Marcus Cole went home to his family, while Deborah and I went home to ours. After a few moments of joyful reunion-during which my son gave me back the data crystal I'd left with him, and told me that his sister had been a pain in the butt during our absence, an allegation strongly refuted by Mattie-my wife and I managed to snatch an hour of privacy in our bedroom and bathroom, and I'll leave it to you to guess how we used the time. Yes, I know, bunnies on aphrodisiacs. I've heard it all before.

By the time Marcus joined me in my study, I was feeling pleasantly relaxed, and from the smile on his face, Marcus had enjoyed an agreeable reunion with Susan and Talia. I waved him to a seat and said, "Deborah won't be joining us. She said something has come up with her sisters. Can you wait for supper until we've finished?"

Marcus nodded and then launched into his story. I listened carefully, not bothering to make notes as I knew he'd submit a full report on his activities for the Anla'Shok records. When he'd finished his account, I caught him up on what had happened in his absence, most of which he'd already heard from Ivanova. There was very little that went on in the ISA that my predecessor didn't know about.

After I finished speaking, we sat in silence for a while, then I went to the kitchen to get us some supper. Mattie and Sali were both there, and my daughter served up two large bowls of chili and rice, telling me that she and her friend had cooked it together. With a silent prayer that Sali was a better cook than Mattie, I returned to the study with our bowls, wondering what was taking Deborah so long.

We ate in silence for a while then, when our bowls were empty, Marcus looked up at me and said abruptly, "I want to retire."

I hadn't seen that one coming at all. "Why? What's brought this on?"

"I want to go back to Draxis. It's a great little colony, Matthew, with some good people. It's going to be very vulnerable now that Buck is dead." I'd told him all about Angel's run in with Lucas Buck during the battle at Coriana VI and how it had ended.

"Lucas Buck may have been an evil bastard, but he kept that colony safe. I don't know what arrangements he's made now, but assuming his son inherits everything, there's no way a twelve year old boy can manage the colony in the way Buck did. They'll need someone to look after the place, keep the Raiders away, negotiate with traders and so on. Between us, Susan, Talia and I can do all that. I know all about running a mine, Talia was an experienced commercial negotiator back on Babylon 5 and Susan can run just about anything she turns her hand to." I had absolutely no doubt about that.

I had to ask, "Are you sure Susan and Talia will go for this?" I wasn't convinced that either woman would be content living on a small colony far from the hub of the ISA.

Marcus bobbed his head enthusiastically. "We've talked about this before. Not specifically Draxis of course, but some backwater colony, where we could live in peace and quiet. I think we're all ready for some of that." He smiled and I couldn't help but think that the lives Marcus, Susan and Talia had lived had definitely been short on those qualities.

I nodded my agreement, thinking rapidly. "I'm seeing Delenn in the morning. Let me discuss this with her. I think it might be an idea for the ISA to offer Draxis protection in the form of a Ranger presence and a Governor. Neither would be onerous positions, but you and Susan would make excellent choices for the roles. That way you don't have to retire. You can carry on working for and with us, but in a more remote capacity." This was very similar to what I was proposing to do for Vya now the emergency was over.

Marcus beamed back at me. "If Delenn agrees, that would be perfect. Of course, it's going to be interesting explaining to Sheriff Iggy why my name has changed and why, having lost a husband, I've suddenly gained two wives. I really must think of a creative explanation before I go back."

I laughed. "I'll look forward to hearing what you come up with, although maybe the truth would be the easiest option."

Marcus and I parted in good humor, both pleased with the way things were working out, but as I returned to my study after seeing him off, I started to brood. There were other things I needed to discuss with Delenn the following day and many were less pleasant than my plans for Marcus and Vya.

When I finally left my office, the house was in darkness. It was later than I'd thought and it seemed everyone had gone to bed.

I wondered why Deborah hadn't called into my study before going up, even if Marcus had still been with me. When I entered our bedroom I could see my wife was in bed, asleep with the covers pulled up over her head. I was a little disappointed that she hadn't waited up for me, but we were both tired after the long hours we'd been working during the previous days and weeks, so I let it go, climbed into bed and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

The following morning I awoke to an empty bed. It seemed Deborah had got up and left quietly, not wanting to disturb me. But I found her failure to wake me disturbing in itself, and promised myself that I would find out what was going on with her as soon as I got back from my meeting with Delenn.

I barely had time to get washed, dressed-yes, I was back in that damned uniform-trim my beard and eat before it was time to leave for my meeting. I took a fly bike from the Ranger vehicle store and flew down to Tuzanor, arriving at Delenn's quarters with about two minutes to spare. I'm a punctual kind of guy.



Delenn greeted me and showed me into her office, nodding courteously for me to sit. As always, I was slightly in awe of her and her beauty. I knew that she was now nearly ninety Earth years old, but it didn't show. She looked exactly the same as when I'd first met her over twenty years before.

Neither Delenn nor I are great fans of long meetings, so we brought each other up to speed quickly on what we each needed to know. I took her through the current distribution of the White

Star fleet and she briefed me on the latest position on the Centauri Republic, which could be pretty much summed up as chaotic.

Delenn said, "The Noble Houses of the Republic are vying for position, working out deals in back rooms to decide who will be the next Emperor. As far as we can tell, the most likely candidate is a young man from House Jaddo, which has been under the protection of House Mollari for a number of years now, since Londo was alive. House Mollari itself has no suitable candidates and neither does House Cotto. Dius Vintari was, as you know, the son of a previous Emperor, Cartagia, but there are no heirs left to that line either. Therefore, Lucco Deradi seems to be the nearest to the throne, if he can get the support of sufficient of the other Noble and Major Houses."

Centauri politics have always given me a headache. How can they call themselves a Republic when they're ruled by an Emperor and an aristocracy of inter-related families? None of it makes sense to me. But there was one question I had to ask.

"Do we have any idea what made Vintari change sides? The Centauri have never been renowned for their loyalty to a cause, but I know Vintari lived with you and John for a number of years. What made him change?"

Delenn's face was deeply sorrowful as she said, "We're not sure. I have wondered if the Drakh somehow managed to attach one of their Keepers to him?" She looked at me quizzically.

I shook my head and said, "It's hard to see how the Centauri empath's could have missed that, but maybe if they'd somehow been corrupted..." I trailed off. I didn't see how that could have happened.

Delenn nodded. "It seems unlikely, but it would be a comfort to think that Dius hadn't betrayed us of his own volition. There was nothing in any of his communications before Coriana VI that gave us any indication of dissatisfaction with the ISA. All relations with the Centauri were perfectly amicable as far as we were aware. If it wasn't a Keeper, I don't understand what happened."

A wave of guilt and frustration swept through me. I knew this was one of the many ways in which I'd failed this incredible woman and the whole ISA. I knew my voice was loaded with bitterness as I said, "It's my job to make sure you get the latest intelligence on what our allies are up to, what they're thinking, feeling and planning. I let you down, Delenn and I'm sorry."

Delenn tried to interrupt me, but I drove on, "I've screwed up a lot of things recently. I should have found a way to defend the rift that wasn't so costly in lives. Hundreds of Rangers died in the battles there. I should have found a better way. I should have stopped the planet killer from destroying Lorka VII and the millions of people who lived there. The fleet I sent to take out that planet killer lost more lives and even more died at Coriana VI. And I sent Mal Fillion to his death on Draxis and nearly lost us Marcus Cole, too."

By then I was pacing up and down Delenn's office, refusing to listen as she kept trying to speak. I came to an abrupt halt in front of her desk and said, "I think it's time I stepped down, Delenn. Time to let someone younger and more competent take over."

There was a long silence before Delenn finally spoke. Her voice was gentle as she said, "Matthew, you have done your job as Entil'Zha better than anyone else could have done it at this time. Yes, we have lost many lives and I mourn them all with you. But you have saved millions, if not billions of sentient beings from death and destruction. No one could have foreseen the attack on Lorka VII. You cannot blame yourself for that. Please, Matthew, consider not just the lives lost but the lives saved. The balance is very much in your favor."

I shook my head and dropped into the chair opposite the President, feeling weary beyond my years. I didn't believe a word she'd said. "Delenn, I'm tired. Tired of sending my people out to die. Tired of feeling the weight of the Anla'Shok resting on my shoulders. Tired of command. I've been doing it one way or another for most of my life, and I think it's time to call a halt. You have my successor all picked out and ready to go. It's time to hand on the baton."

Delenn gave me a sorrowful smile. "I can understand your weariness, Matthew. There are times when I wish I could hand over the burden of governing the ISA to another. But unlike you, I do not yet have a successor trained to take my place. So if you wish to retire, then I will agree. But not because of your failures; there have been none. Retire at the high point of your career, knowing that you have saved the very existence of the ISA. Retire with my deepest gratitude for the role you have played over these last seven years."

I knew Delenn was giving me more credit than I was due. It wasn't I who'd saved the ISA. I would have lost the battle at Coriana VI if it hadn't been for my wife and her sisters and nephew. But I didn't want to get into an argument with the President, so I nodded, grateful that she'd accepted my leaving.

Our discussion turned to the appointments that would be made in the wake of my retirement, which I eventually summarized. "I'll retire after my 65 th birthday in a few weeks' time. John Matheson takes over as Entil'Zha, with Trulann continuing in his role of XO." John would need Trulann's experience when he first took up the reins.

I went on, "Luke Raven will be appointed Chief of Medical Services for the Anla'Shok." Luke's appointment was in a supervisory capacity with additional responsibility for training Ranger

medical staff. "Nureel takes over as Captain of the Excalibur and Ranger David Sheridan becomes her XO." I'd had to twist Delenn's arm on that one. David deserved the job in his own right but Delenn was concerned that others might see nepotism in the appointment. I'd held out for giving her son the role he'd earned, and eventually she'd agreed.

"Marcus Cole, Susan Ivanova and Talia Winters will go to Draxis, with Susan taking up the position of Colony Governor. Vya will be sent to Drathun III to set up a new Ranger station and recruitment center, while Braknar will stay on Centauri Prime for the moment, as liaison between the Rangers and the new Emperor, whoever that may be."

That took care of all the business I'd wanted to conduct with Delenn, and we parted on good terms. Flying back to the Ranger compound, I smiled as I thought how pleased Deborah would be with the way things had worked out. We'd talked about my retirement during the voyage back to Minbar and she'd agreed that a return to Earth would be welcome. I think she was looking forward to an English winter.

I never said she was entirely sane.

Arriving back at the house, I found the place deserted except for Ben, who was feeding Jean-Luc in the kitchen. I made a mental note to talk to our nanny soon about whether she would be willing to accompany us back to Earth. And to talk to my son about what would be best for our grandson, although I knew that the only realistic solution was for Jean-Luc to return to Earth with Deborah and me.

"Have you seen Deborah this morning? I seem to have lost her." I grinned at Ben as I ruffled Jean-Luc's hair, making sure my hands stayed well clear of his face, which was liberally coated with something green and sticky.

Ben carried on trying to get the green stuff into my grandson's mouth, while he was intent on getting the spoon off her. "She went down to the Training Center. There's something going on down there with her sisters and the Technomages. Marcus has taken Gabriel off on a tour of the compound while Jack and Angel are occupied."

I gritted my teeth and wondered if I'd somehow lost my position as Entil'Zha already. Nobody seemed bothered with keeping me informed about what was going on in the Ranger compound. Thanking Ben, I threw off the stupid Ranger coat, grabbed my leather jacket, swept out of the house, jumped onto my motorbike and sped down to the Training Center.

It was one of those times when I wished I could turn on the roaring sound effects that came as standard with the bike, instead of the quiet whisper it made when the sound effects were turned off. It would've been nice to have let everyone in the center know I was coming and give them a hint of how I was feeling.

I stormed through the doors of the assembly hall and found that I'd missed whatever had been going on in there. A group of Technomages were drawn off to one side, with Alwyn in their midst. To my surprise, John and Lily were also there, huddled together in another part of the hall. My wife stood in the center of the room, holding Angel tightly, and both women had tears streaming down their faces, while Jack stood watching them.

I had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, I wasn't happy about it.

Angel stepped away from Deborah as soon as she saw me and rushed back to Jack. I pulled my wife into my arms, and she broke down immediately, weeping copiously, sending waves of pain and loss crashing down over us all. I was completely bewildered, but did the only thing I felt capable of doing at the moment. I held her, comforted her and told her I loved her.

Deborah's sobs quieted slowly and she got herself under control again. Once she'd calmed, I asked her what had happened and she told me that Angel had given up her powers. I wasn't sure if I was more shocked or horrified at this news. I was stunned that Angel had wanted to give up her telekinesis and the leadership of the merge, but I was even more appalled that the strongest weapon in the ISA's armory had just been destroyed.

I knew Deborah would be picking up on my feelings, so I tried to get myself in hand before I asked quietly, "Why didn't you tell me what was going on? I would have made sure I was here for you." What I didn't say was that I would have tried to stop the whole thing, but I suspect Deborah knew that all too well.



She looked up at me and smiled sadly, "You were tied up with Marcus when Angel told me what she wanted to do and I knew you wouldn't be happy about it. I didn't want to argue about it so I left early this morning and let you go to your meeting with Delenn. I know I should have told you, but it really is Angel's decision to make, no one else's and I just couldn't face a row about it."

I kissed Deborah's forehead, knowing that she was right. I would have tried to dissuade Angel, which would have led to an argument, and Jack would have got involved and before we knew it, we'd have had a major family falling out. So perhaps Deborah's way was better. But I hated the idea of her having been alone while she lost her link with her sister, just because she knew I would probably lose my temper.

My relationship with Angel has always been complicated-and at times downright incestuous-and it was usually my wife who'd been peacemaker between us. Yet again, Deborah had placed the wellbeing of her family above her own, and yet again, I felt like a complete jerk.

My wife looked up at me and gave me another sad smile. She'd obviously picked up on my guilty feelings as she said quietly, "I love you, Matthew Gideon. Nothing will ever change that."

And somehow that made everything OK.

We held Mal Fillion's funeral at sunset that day. I wore my hated Entil'Zha uniform, content at least that I wouldn't have to wear it for much longer. Deborah stood at my side, with Marcus Cole

and Susan Ivanova next to us. Jack and Angel also attended, as did every Ranger who was on the base and could be spared from duty.

Fillion had left instructions for the disposal of his belongings as well as for the funeral rites he'd wished to be observed. It was very simple; just a few words from each of us who'd known him. Then we cremated his body and scattered his ashes into the darkness.

15th November 2291

Matthew Gideon

Sitting on the bench at the top of the hill, I looked out to where the blue of the sky met the equally blue sea, the dividing line between the two barely visible. It was a crisp, clear, cold Sunday back on Earth, and Deborah and I had gone for one of our favorite walks after breakfast. We'd climbed the hill behind the house slowly, as Oscar had decided to accompany us, and he didn't move very quickly any more.

When we arrived at the bench we'd had placed by Ilori's memorial cairn, Deborah had taken off her coat and placed it on the ground for Oscar to lie on. I'd smiled and shaken my head, saying, "You'll get cold."

Deborah had smiled back at me and said, "He'll stiffen up if he lies on the cold ground, then you'd have to carry him back down. Better this way. Anyway, you can keep me warm." It sounded like a good plan to me, so I put my arm around her and pulled her close, as we sat in silence, looking out at the view.

Sitting there always made me sad, as the cairn-which got a little bigger every time we went up there, as we always took another stone with us-was a sad reminder of how I'd failed to take care of Ilori. I'd promised her mother, Dureena, that I'd look after her daughter, but Ilori had died of an illness we'd all contracted on Nabula. So now the very last of the Xanderi was remembered here on Earth, her last resting place a cairn of stones, raised according to the custom of her people.

At least I now had the satisfaction of knowing that Lucas Buck, the murderer of another child of Dureena's, was dead. I hadn't been able to bring him to justice myself as I'd promised, but at least he was dead. That would have made the bloodthirsty little thief happy.

I gave a deep sigh of combined sadness and contentment, enjoying the view, enjoying the feeling of my wife at my side and my dog at my feet; enjoying life. I'd come to the conclusion that retirement was like a long, very pleasant vacation, and so far at least, I was feeling neither restless nor bored.

During the weeks between Delenn accepting my resignation and my actual retirement date, Deborah had worked relentlessly, liaising with our agent back on Earth, getting the house in Cornwall opened up again and ready for our return. She'd had one of the spare bedrooms redecorated as a nursery, and another set up as a studio apartment for Ben.

We'd brought the nursery furniture back with us, as John had made it very clear that they'd no need for a nursery in the Entil'Zha's residence after we'd left. I'd probably have said the same thing

myself eighteen months earlier, but life has a way of springing surprises. Fortunately, Jean-Luc had turned out to be one of the more pleasant bombshells life had lobbed our way.

We'd returned to Earth in early October and had spent the previous few weeks settling ourselves back into life in Cornwall. Ben and Mattie had accompanied us, Ben to help with Jean-Luc and Mattie to return for her last year in school.

I didn't think Ben would stay with us for very long, as we were rather too isolated for her tastes. I knew how much she'd enjoyed working on the Ranger compound, with all those fit, young, single men to keep her amused. I couldn't see the selection of males available in the nearest pub-which was a two mile drive away-keeping her entertained for long. But we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. Deborah and me looking after Jean-Luc ourselves for a while wouldn't be a great hardship.

I'd been pleased by Mattie's willingness to return to school, and the turnaround in her attitude towards her studies. Sali had been a good influence on my daughter during her stay with us, which had extended until two days before we left Minbar. She'd arranged for Mattie to have a couple of long talks with her mother, Liz-sorry-Elizabeth Lochley, before we'd left and Liz-what the hell, deal with it-seemed to have persuaded my daughter that a college degree would be a good thing to have, after Deborah and I had failed miserably. It must have been the Earthforce General's rank that did it.

So Mattie was knuckling down to her studies and intended to go to college the following year, graduating before going on to Earthforce officer training. My mother would have been proud that her namesake granddaughter was going into Earthforce, even if she wasn't a Gropo.

I felt Deborah shiver slightly as she leaned against me and I turned and kissed the side of her head. "Want to go back down now?"

She shook her head and snuggled closer to my side. "Not just yet. We might not get many more sunny days this winter, so let's make the most of it." So we sat in silence for a little longer, enjoying the feel of the sun on our faces, even if it had little strength at this time of year.

After a few moments, Deborah said, "I got a response to the message we sent to Alwyn and Sarah this morning."



I turned and looked at her, surprised. "That was quick. How are they? Where are they?"

"They're fine. Still on the Technomage home world, but they'll be moving on soon. You know what they're like. They never stay in one place for long."

Alwyn and Sarah had accompanied the remaining few Technomages and their families back to their mysterious home world, the location of which was unknown to anyone outside their order. They'd located the families of those Mages lost in the battle of Coriana VI and offered those who wanted it transport back to the Mage home

world. Most had taken up their offer, and Alwyn and Sarah had then accompanied them there, to help with the resettlement.

Deborah spoke again. "I invited them to join us for Christmas and they accepted. I hope that's all right?" She looked up at me and smiled again.

I hugged her tightly, happy that after many years she seemed to have completely gotten over her aversion to Christmas celebrations. "Sure. The more the merrier. Marcus and Sali are definitely coming back from Minbar together, are they?"

Deborah nodded again. "They should arrive a couple of days before Christmas. Sali can stay with us for four days, then she'll be going over to Chicago to spend the New Year with her mothers. It's very good of Elizabeth and Sandra to agree for her to come to us for the holidays. I'm sure they'd prefer it if she went home. I just hope Sali and Mattie still like each other as much this time as they did in the summer."

'Like' wasn't quite the word I'd have chosen for how my daughter and her girlfriend felt about each other. Utterly besotted and deeply in lust would have been a better description. I had no doubt that despite having a room of her own as she'd had in the summer-Sali would spend most of the holidays in Mattie's room, and most likely in Mattie's bed.

Ah, young love is a grand thing.

Then again, Deborah and I can still keep the bed springs bouncing, so maybe old love isn't that bad, either.

I kissed my wife again, and she snuggled back against my side as I said, "So that's you, me, Ben, Jean-Luc, Marcus, Mattie and Sali. With Alwyn and Sarah, that makes nine for Christmas, or is it ten? Will Jaysen be joining us too?"

Deborah nodded. "Yes, he'll be coming with Alwyn and Sarah. He wants to look at some Earth medical schools for his post-grad studies. He's just about finished his pre-med course work, although he's not due to graduate until next summer. That's the advantage of remote schooling, I guess." Sarah and Alwyn's son was planning to follow in his mother's career footsteps. My wife paused for a moment then went on, "And there'll be more than ten of us for Christmas. Angel, Jack and Gabriel will also be joining us."

That really did surprise me. Not so much that they were coming, but that Deborah had invited them. I turned on the bench to look closely at my wife, frowning as I said, "I thought you didn't like Gabriel. What made you ask them?"

Deborah bit her lip, then said quietly, "He's twelve years old, Matthew. I shouldn't dislike a child. I've learned from the mistake I made with Vya. I have to be more open-minded. He's Angel's son, so I know he must have good in him, whoever his father was."

I didn't want to argue with my wife, so I left it at that, but I had my doubts. I'd had a long talk with my son after Angel, Jack and Gabriel had left Minbar back in the summer, and learned that Marcus hadn't much liked Gabriel either. He'd found the boy secretive and sly, hardly qualities that endeared him to empaths.

I knew Deborah was trying hard to put her prejudice against the boy aside, determined not to create difficulties with her sister, but I worried that in doing so she was denying the evidence of her own abilities. She was bending over backwards to give the child credit, and I wasn't sure that was wise.

Because after all was said and done, he was Lucas Buck's son. He'd been raised for twelve years as Lucas had wanted him raised. I wasn't convinced that any characteristics he may have inherited from his mother would have survived such an upbringing.

But I said nothing, and silently resolved to watch Gabriel very carefully over the holidays. It was going to be an interesting Christmas. And having thirteen sitting down for Christmas dinner was hardly a good omen.

For the moment, I pushed all such concerns aside, and stood, pulling Deborah to her feet and calling for Oscar to get up off his lazy ass. He lumbered to his feet and started plodding down the hillside towards home. I helped Deborah on with her jacket, then walked down with her, my arm around her shoulders, looking forward to the rare roast beef and Yorkshire puddings that I knew awaited us back at the house.

Did I tell you how much I enjoy a traditional English Sunday lunch? And Oscar always looks forward to the leftovers, if there are any.

He never gets fed bits of meat under the table, of course. Just like he's never allowed on the furniture.

Why are you looking at me like that? Anyone would think you didn't believe me.



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