

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Five B - Part 4: Darkness Descends

by *The Space Witches*



Draal

Chapter 1

18th May 2291

Matthew Gideon

It was a fine Monday in May and the sun was shining down on the Ranger Compound in the hills above the Minbari city of Tuzanor, where I now live. Just to explain, my wife and I still keep to the old Earth calendar and days of the week, despite the different length of year on Minbar-one and a half times longer than the Earth year.

So the previous day had been a Sunday, and Deborah had cooked one of my favorite meals, a traditional English Sunday lunch, with rare roast beef and what she calls Yorkshire puddings, but I call popovers. Whatever they're called, they're delicious. The beef had been accompanied by roasted potatoes and vegetables, gravy and a fiery horseradish sauce. You have no idea how difficult it is to get some of those ingredients on Minbar, but it's worth the effort. I'm salivating just at the memory.

I pressed my finger against the screen in front of me, signing off the last requisition of the day, then leaned back in satisfaction. I'd finally caught up on all my paperwork. I don't know why it is but every job I've ever had seems to generate more reports and paperwork than the one before. The job of Entil'Zha of the Anla'Shok was no different.

Fortunately, just as when I'd been Captain of the Excalibur, I had a good Executive Officer who helped keep the trivia off my desk. Trulann had been a Ranger for over twenty years and I'd known him since he'd been my main liaison with the Rangers and the Inter-Stellar Alliance back when I'd still been looking for the cure to the Drakh plague. I'd been delighted to have him join me as my XO when I'd taken the role of Ranger One, nearly seven years before.

Having Trulann responsible for running most of the day to day administration of the Rangers freed me up for the important decision making. Absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I find such work unbelievably boring. I guess I'm more of an overview person but I know how to pick good people to make up for my flaws, which is the most important part of leadership. Recognize your own weaknesses and make sure that you have people around you that compensate for them. So don't look at me like that and mutter about taking advantage, OK? I know my strengths and weaknesses, that's all.

No, I'm not lazy, I'm being a good mentor by helping develop my teams' strengths. Oh, just shut up, will you?

But even with someone as good as Trulann keeping the wheels on the truck there was still a certain amount of detail and reporting that I couldn't avoid. I'd just put in a straight eight hours work clearing the backlog of such items that I'd allowed to build up over the previous couple of weeks and I was feeling very pleased with myself as a result.

I leaned back in my chair, stretched my arms above my head and let out a loud yawn. So loud that my dog, Oscar, lifted his head from where he'd been sleeping in his bed in the corner of my office, giving me a filthy look for having disturbed his slumber. Sleeping was something Oscar did a lot of as he got older. He'd turned ten a few months earlier, which is getting on in years for a dog of his breed and we knew that his health was failing, but he was still enjoying his life, just at a slower pace these days.



As he'd aged, his once golden coat had darkened but his face had got lighter with white hairs spreading around his muzzle. I could only sympathize as my own hair was well streaked with grey and if I didn't shave-and I hadn't shaved recently-my beard was heading for full white. Fortunately I was in better physical condition than poor old Oscar whose joints had stiffened with arthritis as he'd aged. My wife

didn't allow me to be anything but limber and she ensured I got a vigorous daily work out in our bedroom, in addition to the hour I spent in our home gym every day.

Since moving to Minbar to make our home in the Ranger Training Compound nearly seven years before, we'd made a few changes to the Entil'Zha's residence. The downstairs study had become my office, from where I worked most of the time. Another downstairs room had been converted into a gym, while upstairs, Deborah had her own study, previously a guest bedroom. The dining room doubled as a conference room for meetings when more than a couple of people got together. The dining table could seat ten comfortably, so there were few occasions when I had to hold meetings over in the main Administration building where Trulann and his team worked. Smaller meetings could be held in my office.

I looked around at my working space with a sense of satisfaction. I had it just how I liked it, comfortable if a little untidy in places, but not so much as to offend my military sense of order. That pretty much described my life, too.

I was approaching my 65th birthday, and still enjoying life to the full. I was fit, well, had a job I loved and a family I adored. What more could a man ask? My wife was upstairs working, my son was in the Ranger camp approaching the end of his first year of training, and my daughter, Mattie, was back on Earth completing her schooling. She was still insisting that she wanted to go straight into Earthforce when she turned 18 the following year, but Deborah and I were hoping we could persuade her to go to college and then into Earthforce Academy Officer Training School, like her cousin Dasha.

*So far we were having little success and Mattie was still intent on going into Basic Training, just like her grandmother, for whom she was named. We still had a few months to work on her but knowing how stubborn Mattie can get, I was losing hope of winning her over. Of course, Mattie takes after her mother in that respect. I'm *never* stubborn. Just don't tell my wife where I said Mattie gets her willfulness from, OK? That'll be our little secret.*

Having stretched myself to the point where I could hear my shoulder joints pop, I stood and decided I would go upstairs to see whether my wife had finished work for the day. Deborah had continued her writing over the previous few years and she now had a string of best-selling novels to her credit. She also worked at my side, travelling with me wherever I went, advising me on what people around me were feeling. Having an empath for a wife had been an essential part of my new job, and I loved the fact that I now had an official reason for never being parted from her.

We'd been married for over twenty years and I still loved her as much as I had on the day of our wedding, perhaps even more so. Few days went past when we didn't find some private time to spend with each other, usually getting physical. Our passion for each other hadn't diminished in any way with the passing of the years and with a couple of exceptions, we'd been completely faithful to each other during those years. The exceptions had occurred early on in our marriage, and while I wasn't exactly proud of my infidelities, I was completely delighted with Naima, my unacknowledged daughter from the single night of loneliness induced desire I'd spent with Deborah's sister, Lily.

Naima was now twenty years old and like her older brother and sister, Dasha and Faylinn, she was back on Earth, in college. Dasha had gone into Earthforce Academy the previous year, while Faylinn had astonished me when she'd announced she wanted to become a doctor like her father, Luke, who was still Chief Medical Officer of the Excalibur. My experience with Faylinn as a child had been that she was far better at ripping things apart than at patching them up. We had a small teddy bear in Marcus' bedroom upstairs that still bore the scars of one of Faylinn's attacks.

I smiled and left my office abruptly, thinking that life was pretty damned good. I took the stairs two at a time, remembering how Deborah had told me on the morning of our 20th wedding anniversary that she had every intention of celebrating our 40th and 60th anniversaries in exactly the same way: making love, vigorously and passionately. As I'll be 103 by the time we've been married 60 years, that may be a little optimistic, but who knows? Given the way human life expectancy continues to increase, and the fact that we both keep in excellent physical condition, we may still be limber enough to have some fun well into our eleventh decade. A few white hairs aren't going to slow us down!

I paused in the doorway of my wife's study, disappointed to find the room empty. Then I smiled and realized that instead of working on her new book as she'd said she planned to do that afternoon, she was playing hooky, and I knew exactly where I would find her.

A couple of doors down the corridor I entered the nursery and found Deborah just where I'd expected. I paused in the doorway for a moment, enjoying the view. Deborah's hair was now as much silver as gold and she kept it shorter and straighter, but still long enough to tie back when she wanted.

As always, she was dressed in black; today she wore a black t-shirt tucked into a black skirt that was snug around her waist, but which flared out into a fullness that fell to her mid-calf when she stood. I could see she was wearing black stockings beneath the skirt and wondered if they were the ones with the lacy tops that I like the most. I had every intention of carrying out a detailed inspection later to check this out. Just satisfying my natural curiosity, of course. And my sense of military order. Inspections are important part of any military regime.

Deborah's face was still beautiful despite the fine lines that now creased her forehead and gathered at the corners of her lovely, hazel eyes. Her nose was still long and straight, her lips full and luscious, making me want to kiss her, as I always did.



Deborah looked up at me and smiled from where she was sitting cross legged on the floor, playing with our grandson.

Yes, you heard me, our grandson.

I have to admit that it had been a shock the previous summer when our son Marcus had arrived on Minbar, having just graduated college in England, holding a little bundle in his arms and announcing that this was his son.

It turned out that my son had been as negligent about getting his contraceptive shots as his father had been twenty-one years earlier. A little summer loving with a casual girlfriend had had unexpected consequences. The baby's mother had told Marcus about her condition when she was about four months along, and said she'd decided to keep the baby. Does any of that sound familiar?

Marcus had promised her that he would support her decision and provide whatever help she needed and wanted, although unlike me and Deborah, they'd known that they wouldn't be a good match for a long term relationship. With uncanny timing, the baby had been born on the morning of my son's 21st birthday.

When Deborah, Mattie and I had arrived later that day to take him out celebrating, along with his Uncle Jack and Auntie Angel who had made a point of being in town for the event, Marcus had looked tired, but told us that he'd pulled an all-nighter the night before. He knew better than to tell an outright lie to his mother, who can sense a falsehood a mile off. So he left us to assume that he'd been studying all night for his then fast-approaching final exams, without ever actually saying so. He'd really been up all night with the ex-girlfriend, while his son was being born. We knew nothing about this at the time.

The first we found out about it was when he brought the baby back to Minbar, telling us that the mother had changed her mind about keeping the child and didn't want her family involved. So Marcus took him and brought him to Deborah and me, asking for our help in raising his son. Well, what could we say but yes? Although I nearly sent them both packing when he told us the child's name.

"I named him after all my uncles and my father," he'd said proudly, "He's called Jean-Luc Matthew Alwyn Maximillian Gideon. Jean for John and Jack, Luc for Luke and the rest are obvious."

I'd damn near choked on the coffee I was drinking at the time. "Jean-Luc? You've called him Jean-Luc?! You'd better hope he doesn't want a career as a Space Corps Captain or he'll never live that name down!" I thought I was very restrained in making no comment about the Alwyn and Maximillian bits. By the time we'd got through the Jean-Luc and Matthew parts of the name, what came afterwards was hardly relevant. And I didn't particularly want to annoy Uncle Alwyn. That's never a good idea.

Deborah had let me down completely by saying she thought it was a lovely name, taking the baby into her arms, and looking closely at his face. Then she'd looked up at me and gave one of her most mischievous smiles. "He has his father's hair and eyes, but he's got his grandfather's ears."

I'd gone over and looked more carefully at my unfortunate grandchild and realized she was quite right. The poor little bastard (and I use the word advisedly) had my ears. They stuck out at right-angles to his head making him look like a wing nut. Fortunately, over the months that followed he'd started to grow into those ears, so he no longer looked quite so much like Dumbo about to take off in full flight, but they still stuck out.

Little Jean-Luc was now just over a year old and he lived with Deborah and me while his father was training to become a Ranger. Having started the previous summer, Marcus had nearly completed his first year of training, but still had another full year to go before he would be sent out into the field. He lived with the other trainees in the Ranger barracks, and was given no special privileges because of his parentage.

Not that he wanted any. He'd wanted to be a Ranger since meeting David Sheridan when he was three years old and he'd never wavered in his ambition. He loved every minute of the training, but enjoyed his visits with his parents and his son when he had free time.

Deborah and I had employed a nanny, Benedikte, to help with Jean-Luc as our jobs kept us well occupied, and we didn't really have the time to devote ourselves around the clock to raising another child. Even so, and despite my wife's frequent protestations that she didn't really like small children very much, I would often find her in Jean-Luc's nursery, playing with him.

My grandson was now starting to walk, albeit unsteadily, and could push himself up onto his feet when the mood took him. As I entered the nursery, he turned to look at me and gave me the huge grin that was his specialty. He pushed himself upright and toddled towards me holding out his arms and making a noise which I chose to interpret as "Grandpa!"

Deborah insists that at this age Jean-Luc can't make such a complex sound, but I think she's just jealous because he doesn't call her grandma. Or maybe he's just smarter than I give him credit for

and he knows that calling her grandma might not be such a good idea.

I swooped down, picked my grandson up and threw him into the air above my head. He squealed with delight, then snuggled against my shoulder as I caught him and held him. I couldn't help but remember when Marcus had been that age and I had played the same games with him. Where had those twenty one years gone?



My wife smiled up at me, and sent me a wave of love and contentment. Lifting herself to her feet she came over and kissed me, then said softly, "How did we get this lucky?"

I freed one arm and pulled her to my side, kissing her swiftly on the mouth. "I don't know, but don't jinx it."

But it was too late. My commlink went off, so I sighed, handed the baby to Deborah and answered, "Gideon, go."

Trulann's voice came over loud and clear, "If you have a moment, Entil'Zha, I think you should hear this."

"Go ahead." I looked up at Deborah and shrugged. She held the baby close, frowning as another voice came over the link.

The voice was rich and deep, and I knew it was familiar, although it took me a moment to place it.

"The rift is open. Darkness descends." Six words then static.

Deborah and I looked at each other, and I could see the color had drained from her face. She'd also recognized the voice and the significance of the message.

I spoke to my commlink. "That's Draal, who runs the Great Machine on Epsilon III. He's been guarding a rift between universes in Sector 14 for years now. If the rift is open, then we could have major trouble on the way. Get all White Stars within a day's travel of Sector 14 diverted and on their way there. Get the Communications Room fully staffed, we're going to need every comm channel we've got. And let Delenn know about the message. I'm on my way."

I cut the link and said quietly to my wife, "Can you get Benedikte to take Jean-Luc and then follow me down to the Comms Room? I'd like your input on this and I suspect Trulann would value your help."

Deborah nodded. "Matthew, if the rift is open, then those aliens from Jack's universe may be coming through. We should let Jack and Angel know."

I nodded. "That's first on my list of things to do, right after I get to the Comms Room." With one last quick kiss I left my wife and grandson, grabbed my leather jacket from the hallstand and ran for my motorbike, which was parked outside.

Deborah Gideon

I held Jean-Luc tightly as I called Benedikte on my comm link. She'd had the afternoon off, but fortunately she'd stayed in the compound and said she could be back in half an hour. I signed off then carried my grandson downstairs, thinking furiously. Turning into the kitchen, I popped the baby into his high chair and got some of his food from the refrigerator. Then I prepared Oscar's dinner, knowing that it could be hours before Matthew and I got home that night, if we got home at all.

While I waited for Ben to arrive, I fed the baby then made some sandwiches and put hot soup into a flask to take with me. I know my husband well enough to know that when he's busy he loses track of time and forgets to eat. He's meticulous in ensuring the well-being of the people working for him, but tends to overlook his own needs.

I also tried to link to my sisters, to let them know what was happening. Unfortunately, Lily was asleep and Angel didn't respond to my call. I could sense that she was preoccupied with something that was leaving her oblivious to the outside world. That introspection had been happening more and more often in recent months and I resolved to try to get her to open up about what was bothering her when we next met in person. It was too easy for Angel to break off from our mental link; I wanted her sitting in front of me where I could see her. And yes, I know, I'm overprotective of my little sister. She's been through a lot, so I have good reason. In the meantime, I got on with my chores.

As soon as Ben got back, I thanked her for coming in, grabbed my bag and ran from the house. The main admin building that accommodated the Communication Room wasn't far from our quarters, but I covered the ground at a trot, wanting to get there as quickly as possible. It was the same route I used for my daily run around the compound anyway. I far prefer to run outside when I can, rather than using the treadmill in our home gym. It helps me keep in touch with all the people who live and work in the compound.

Arriving at the admin building, I smiled as I saw my husband's motorbike parked outside. He could have got to his destination nearly as quickly by running, but he loved that bike so much he used it whenever he got chance. Mind you, I have some fond memories of my own for things we have done on that bike, too. The doors opened for me and I went through to the back of the building where the Comms Room was housed.

Normally at this time of day there would be just one or two communication stations in use, carrying out routine monitoring of Ranger traffic. Today was different. Trulann had called in every Ranger competent to staff the stations and the room buzzed with activity.

The twenty stations all faced in towards a central pit on a slightly lower level, which housed a large map table, about five times the size of the one the Excalibur had used. Matthew stood at the table, above which was projected a 3-dimensional holographic image of the ISA territory, with all Ranger ships marked with pin points of lights. The blue lights indicated that the ship was in normal space. When the light turned red it indicated that the ship had jumped to hyperspace. Red lights crawled across the image, all converging on the area I knew to be Sector 14.

You may be wondering how I know so much about the operation of the Comms Room. Well, I don't sit at home twiddling my thumbs and writing all day.

Over the previous years, I'd audited pretty much every course given to the Ranger Trainees and yes, that includes using the Denn'bok fighting staff. I still wasn't as good with it as Marcus Cole, but I could give both Matthew and my son Marcus some stiff opposition. Matthew sometimes said that I should be enrolled as a Ranger, as I'd completed all the necessary training, but I felt that might cause friction amongst those who'd taken the training full time. There were some who would not appreciate the Boss's Wife being given equal status with them.

One thing all the Rangers had got used to was my being at Matthew's side at all times, and in particular, joining him and Trulann whenever they carried out battle simulations. I could advise Matthew on how his people were feeling and responding, who needed help, who needed rest, and who was thriving on the adrenaline of the exercise. To make it a little less obvious what I was doing, Trulann had trained me in his role, so that by now we could split his responsibilities between us if necessary. This was one of those necessary occasions.

As I came through the door of the Comms Room I was intercepted by my son, who handed me a headpiece and data-pad. He didn't have sufficient training to man one of the comms stations as yet, but he'd obviously persuaded one of his teachers to let him join the action, even if he could only stand by the door and hand equipment to anyone authorized to enter. I acknowledged him with the same nod of thanks I would have given to any Ranger in that position, but took the opportunity to link to him as I fitted my earpiece in place.

[/Anything I need to know?/]

Marcus smiled and sent back, [/Everyone seems to be coping, but you might want to keep an eye on Kullkarren over there. I think he's feeling a bit out of his depth. /]

I flicked my eyes across to the Brakiri who sat at a station about half way around the room then looked away as I walked through the gap in the workstations that led to the ramp down into the map pit. I knew Kullkarren had only recently completed training, as I'd followed his career with the Rangers with great interest since he'd arrived on Minbar a couple of years earlier. Kullkarren had come to Minbar from Eriadne, and he was the grandson of my old friend Nikarren, who had died so tragically on Mars.

Arriving at Matthew's side, I placed my bag at my feet then did a quick scan of the room and confirmed what Marcus had already sensed. Everyone in the room was focused, feeling confident and calm, except for Kullkarren who was unsure of himself. I made a mental note to take a walk around the stations later, and while being careful not to draw attention to the Brakiri, I could give him a small mental boost of confidence as I passed.

In the meantime, I had work to do. Matthew acknowledged my arrival with a smile, then went back to focusing on the map in front of him, giving quiet orders to Trulann, who stood on his other side. Trulann also nodded at me, then keyed his data-pad to link it to mine. The map in front of us split in two, half tinted green, half yellow. My pad started streaming data and I now had control of the yellow half of the map.

Every White Star and all smaller Ranger vessels in that half of space were now reporting in to me. I had to pass on anything important to Matthew for his decisions, while not distracting him with unnecessary information. It had taken a lot of training with Trulann and Matthew to achieve this balance, but I'd eventually learned what was needed.

Shortly after I'd taken up position, Delenn arrived. I heard Matthew briefing her on the actions he'd taken so far, which Delenn acknowledged with a nod. I could feel her satisfaction with the position she could see on the map, and I took the opportunity to send a private message to Matthew's datapad telling him that the President of the ISA approved his actions. Matthew didn't acknowledge my message but I saw his lips twitch into a half smile as he read it.

We all watched as the lights crawled around the three-dimensional image in front of us, most of which were now red, and it was soon apparent what Matthew's strategy involved. He was moving all fighting ships to surround and englobe Sector 14. Only one light moved in a different direction and that was the ship Matthew had sent to the Epsilon Eridani system to investigate the message we'd received.

Epsilon Eridani was the sun around which Babylon 5 had orbited before it was decommissioned and destroyed ten years ago. The space station had held a fixed position above Epsilon III which was where the Great Machine was located.

The Great Machine was a technological wonder of unknown abilities and origin. Powered by a massive network of advanced fusion reactors, this complex machine required a sentient being to merge with it in order to regulate and stabilize its operation. With the colossal amount of raw power at its disposal, the machine could boost a tachyon signal over dozens of light years, project the operator's mind into deep space and even control, widen or close a rift in space. In addition to its communications and sensing abilities, the Machine had formidable defense systems, including missiles and particle beam weaponry capable of taking out starships in near orbit.

The being who had been merged with the machine for more than thirty years was a Minbari called Draal. He'd previously been Delenn's teacher, and Matthew and I had 'met' him-or rather his holographic projection-back in 2273, when a rift had opened in Sector 14. Draal had projected himself into our bedroom onboard the Excalibur at an extremely inconvenient moment; he'd very nearly gotten himself an explicit education in human procreation.

Matthew had not been amused and had made his displeasure quite clear. He'd only relented as the situation at the time had been serious. When the rift had opened, a different version of the Excalibur had come through. The sole survivor on board that Excalibur had been the Captain, the man we now knew as Jack Gideon, my sister's husband.

The Excalibur had been pursued through the rift by an alien species unknown to the ISA at that time and not discovered since in our universe. They'd attacked our Excalibur with a force and vigor unlike anything we'd previously encountered. No other attacker had ever been able to board the Excalibur as those aliens had. They'd been beaten off with great difficulty, and the Excalibur had then stayed to guard the rift against anything else that might come through.

We'd been relieved of that duty by Draal, who'd used the powers of the Great Machine to seal the rift. The message received from Draal earlier, and the silence since, indicated that there was

something very wrong happening in the Epsilon Eridani system and in Sector 14. We wouldn't know exactly what had gone wrong until our ships arrived at their destinations.

Now all the Ranger ships had received orders and were on their way, things started to quiet in the Comms Room. I sent Matthew a brief message advising which operators were tiring, including Kullkarren. Matthew then gave orders for those comms operators to be relieved for a rest break. I watched as Kullkarren moved to vacate his position, and Marcus Cole moved in to relieve him. Marcus was accompanied by my nephew, Vya, who slid into the station next to him.

Since Matthew had taken the position of Entil'Zha he'd kept both Marcus Cole and Vya close to him on Minbar. They were both people he trusted completely, although he often pretended to be exasperated with Marcus Cole's prattling speech pattern. But he wanted them both stationed in the compound for other reasons too. Marcus Cole was kept close so he could live full-time with his wife, Susan Ivanova, Matthew's predecessor, and their other partner, Talia Winters. Matthew owed Susan his life and was determined to repay that debt in any way he could. Marcus was also an excellent teacher and mentor for new Ranger trainees.



We kept Vya close to us as we were the nearest thing he had to a family since losing all three of his parents and his younger sister within a few weeks of each other back in 2284. Vya still carried a burden of guilt about their deaths, as he'd been the one to suggest that they should help us in the investigation of the Nabulan system. Vya's parents had all died on that mission; Max and Dureena when their shuttle was destroyed, Ilas in the process of saving my life and possibly the lives of everyone on board the Excalibur.

Vya's younger sister, Ilori, had died of a lung infection shortly after we'd returned with her to Earth. We all still bore the scars of our losses but Vya more than the rest of us. So Matthew kept him close at hand and we both made sure our nephew was never allowed to wallow in the guilt and depression that might otherwise have overtaken him.

I'd opened my bag, and was getting out the sandwiches and soup I'd made earlier when the light that indicated the White Star heading for Epsilon III turned from red to blue. It had arrived.

Angelique Gideon

While I stared out of the porthole into the vastness of space beyond the protective walls of our ship I brooded. Who we are is made up of the choices we make. All those little and large decisions, both good and bad, converging to shape the road we travel.

We'd just left Tau Ceti IV after another successful trading mission. With each new world Jack and I visited for trading purposes I was always filled with both hope and dread. Hope that I might make up for a mistake I'd made a long time ago and dread that I would find what I was looking for and what it would mean if I did.

What mistake am I talking about? The day I abandoned my child to the care of a monster.

It was now nearly twelve years since I'd run from Lucas Buck on Regula IV. Twelve years since I'd given him what he'd wanted - a son.

I know my family and my husband would say it wasn't my fault; that I'd had no choice given the circumstances, but I don't agree. Yes, I'd been afraid. I'd felt hopeless. I knew Lucas would never let me raise our son with love, would never let me influence him in any way. And after I'd linked with my beautiful son, Gabriel, and sensed nothing but evil and hate, I'd believed...I'd let myself believe that there was no hope for him. That he was Lucas' son through and through, that there was no saving him and I would only wind up dead if I stayed.

Thinking about my actions now made me feel sick. Sick and disappointed in myself and in my own weakness. How could I have left my baby like that? No matter what I felt inside him, no matter if I feared and hated his father or feared my own death. What kind of person did that? It was something I'd asked myself over and over again more times than I could count.

I should have been stronger. I should have stayed and fought for my son. Offered him whatever protection I could. I know what I felt inside my son, but was that all there was? Is nature always stronger than nurture? Could I have influenced Gabriel? Would showing him love and kindness have made a difference? No matter the outcome I should have stayed to try and make a difference.

Of course it's not just about having stayed for Gabriel's sake. I knew then that if I stayed one of two things would have happened; either Lucas would eventually have killed me or I would have killed him. After I discovered that he'd killed my first husband-the first man to show me what real love was, to give me what I'd always wanted-all I'd wanted to do was to obliterate Lucas. To kill him. But I knew, even then, the price for doing that was to damn my son to the Rage.

The Rage: the demon inside Lucas Buck that controlled him, that caused nothing but pain and torment. If Lucas were to die the Rage would move onto his heir. That was Gabriel's sole purpose. Lucas didn't want a child for any other reason. The Rage needed a specific bloodline to possess. A direct male bloodline. If Lucas died, Gabriel would become the Rage's new host.

I'd fled Lucas and my son. Whatever reasons I'd had back then, I could no longer live with. I was wracked with guilt as I wondered where my son was, how he was and what Lucas was doing to him. I never let myself think too deeply about that, but I knew my son would be growing up without love, without compassion or kindness. And whatever excuses I could make for leaving my son meant nothing. I should have been stronger. If only I'd known then the true power I possess.

I now know what I can do, what I'm capable of if I tap into the darkness inside me. That is, no doubt, the reason why Lucas chose me to be the mother of his child in the first place. With that power I could not only kill Lucas, I could destroy the Rage and prevent it from ever possessing my son. But I also know the price that would be paid could be far worse than the Rage claiming my son. I could very well rid the universe of the Rage but in its stead I might unleash something far worse. Me.

Yet that didn't stop me from searching every planet we came to for my son and his father. After I'd fled Regula IV Lucas and Gabriel had vanished without a trace. I knew that would happen. Lucas would never have stayed where I could find him.

For the longest time I'd tried to forget. Isn't that ridiculous? Like a mother could ever forget her own child even if she was the one who abandoned him. So every new planet we come to, I search. I wonder if this will be the planet where I finally find Lucas and my son. I'm learning to live with disappointment.

I know Jack wishes that I would stop looking, because he knows how it breaks my heart when I fail. I don't hold that against him. He still supports me in my search, but he just hates to see me cry. And I do cry, every time I find nothing.

I sometimes believe I will never find them. And sometimes I wonder if that wouldn't be for the best because what would I do? Lucas would never let me rescue my son. It would mean putting myself, Jack and my family right back in his crosshairs. I couldn't fight him and the Rage without tapping into that thing inside me that gives me extraordinary power. And if I didn't stop him, Lucas would go after everyone and everything I loved, as he'd promised on the day I left Regula IV.

Of course I could try and involve my sisters. I suspect together we could defeat him and the Rage without me becoming a monster, but I feared dragging them anywhere near Lucas Buck again. I could just hear my sisters protesting. They'd do anything for me, even risk their lives. I love my sisters dearly but I'd caused them enough suffering because of Lucas. I was never again going to involve them or put their lives in jeopardy for my own need.

Sometimes I felt like throwing caution to the wind and letting myself use the full potential of my power. I could so easily find Lucas and my son. In the blink of an eye-if I just let myself use the darkness within me-I could not only locate them, but I could extinguish the Rage with a thought and bring my son back to me.

Perhaps I could control it. Alwyn had worked with me to teach me to tap into that power, just barely skimming the surface, learning to control it without it consuming me. Of course, at the same time Alwyn had and still does caution me never to go too deep. He doubts I could ever control it. I wish I could say he was wrong, but I know he's not. There are some things you can't control and some places you should never venture. I know this because I still have nightmares about what happened on Eriadne and what I did to Galen, no matter how justified.

I shook those memories away and continued to stare out into space while I tried not to let another thought creep forward. Another reason not to kill Lucas. I tried to clamp down on it, to deny its truth, but the simple fact was that I knew in order to destroy the Rage, Lucas would also have to die. And while a part of me wanted the bastard dead, deep inside me was a part that still loved Lucas and always would. That part of me couldn't bear the thought of him dying, no matter how much he deserved it.

I shook my head, vehemently shutting down on that thought. I had to bury those feelings so deep they'd never see the light of day. No, no matter how much I wanted my son and for the Rage to be gone, I couldn't risk my sisters' lives or chance unleashing a worse power on the universe. If I couldn't control my power we could be consumed by it. That means I have no idea how to save my son and destroy the Rage if I were ever to find them.

Perhaps it's better this way. Maybe some things are not to be. Gods know I've made some awful mistakes. Mistakes that I've learned to live with. Maybe this is just another one of those mistakes.

I sighed and moved away from the porthole. Brooding wasn't going to do me any good. And I should know because I go through this on every new world we come to. I wallow in sadness and all that does is worry Jack and I don't want to worry my husband.

Jack had enough on his mind at present as one of his trading fleet had gone missing. Jack had talked with other ship captains during our most recent stop and they believed it had to be raiders of some kind, who'd captured the ships, killed the crew and then taken the cargo and broken the ships down for parts. But Jack wasn't so sure. He feared something more was behind what was going on. Jack planned on contacting Minbar and Matthew as soon as we were in communication range to discuss the issue. If anyone had any information on what was happening it would be the head of the Rangers.

For a moment I allowed myself to smile. It still tickled me that my brother-in-law was Entil'Zha.

My smile faded, replaced with a frown. Whatever or whoever was out there attacking ships, I hoped they didn't cross our path as we headed out to our next destination. I really wasn't in the mood for a battle of any kind. Not that our ship couldn't protect herself. She may be a trading vessel, but Jack had made sure she was well armed and able to defend herself if needed.

I turned to leave our quarters to go and find my husband when my commlink sounded. It was Jack.

"Change of plans, love. I just got a message from Minbar. The rift in Sector 14 is open again, and Matt wants us. He's worried that the aliens who attacked my Excalibur will be coming through and he wants me there to help. We're heading for Minbar."

Matthew Gideon

"This is White Star 147. We've arrived in the Epsilon Eridani system and opened our jump point at a position two degrees ahead of the projected orbit of Epsilon III. We're scanning now."

The holographic image of Andy Bentley, Shok'na (or Captain if you prefer) of White Star 147 replaced the map that had been displayed in front of us a moment before. I knew Andy well and he was perfectly suited to the mission I'd given him. Steady, reliable and followed orders to the letter.

Not one of my more creative Captains, but I didn't want creativity at that point, I wanted reliable data and Andy was the man for that job. It was fortunate that his had been the nearest ship to the Epsilon Eridani system when the call went out. His crew was the usual mix of species that made up the Rangers, but I knew his XO (or Shok'nali if we're being picky, which I'm not) was another human, Maria Montoya, who could provide the initiative that Andy sometimes lacked.

These thoughts raced through my head as I waited for Andy to continue his report. Delenn stood silently to one side of me, Deborah on the other, and Trulann across the map table from me. I scanned the room and saw my son slip out of the doors. I wondered momentarily where he was going, then focused again on Andy's image as he spoke.

"We can't find it."

I couldn't help myself, "Andy, it's a planet! How can you lose a planet?"



Captain Bentley shook his head, "It's not where it should be. We've scanned the whole system and it's not hiding anywhere." Andy's mouth quirked into a small smile then he went on more soberly, "I'm sorry Entil'Zha, but the damned planet just isn't here."

Before I could tell him to look again, Delenn spoke. "Captain Bentley, please scan for debris in the area where the planet should be. Anything down to a meter or so in size."

I turned to look at Delenn, wondering if the President of the ISA had lost her mind. But before I could speak, Andy's voice came back. "Confirmed. There's a large cloud of debris in the location where Epsilon III should be. Its total mass is just less than 15% of the planetary mass shown in our records, but it's in the right place."

Delenn turned to me, her face pale and drawn. "I have seen this before, during the last Shadow War. This is what a Vorlon Planet Killer leaves behind after it has destroyed its target. Epsilon III, the Great Machine and Draal are no more." Her face was lined with sorrow as she mourned the loss of the Minbari teacher she'd known since she was young.

My mind was racing like a greyhound on speed. The news that the Great Machine and Draal were gone was bad enough, but now we had another problem to worry about.

"A Vorlon Planet Killer? Where the hell did that come from?"

Delenn shook her head. "I do not know. The Vorlon planets are still barred to entry, so I cannot believe that this is one of their ships. But it is possible that the Shadows had similar technology and their subject races may have acquired it. If that is the case, the ISA and the whole galaxy are in grave danger."

As if we didn't have enough on our hands with the rift opening and the possibility of powerful, hostile aliens coming through. Now we had a Shadow Planet Killer to contend with. I turned back to the holographic image in front of me.

"Andy, a vessel big enough to destroy a planet must leave some trace of its engine emissions behind. Scan for them."

There was a pause then Bentley came back, "Affirmative. We have a trail of tachyon particles leaving the system. We may be able to track the ship into hyperspace."

I nodded. "Get on its trail but make sure you stay well back. I don't think a single White Star would have much chance against a ship that can destroy a planet. Once you've found it, follow it and keep us updated with your co-ordinates. We'll send reinforcements to join you in tracking it as soon as we can. Good hunting." Andy acknowledged his orders and cut the communication.

I turned to Delenn. "If we have a planet killer and a fleet of aliens attacking us through the rift, we're going to need some help. Even with the fleet of over 250 ships the Rangers now has, and the new,

more powerful White Stars coming on line, we may need support from the ISA members' fleets."

Delenn nodded and said, "Keep me informed of progress and I shall advise the ISA members of the position. I will find you the support you need, Entil'Zha. The Excalibur is, of course, at your disposal." That was polite; there was no 'of course' about it. The Excalibur was an ISA ship, not reporting to the Rangers. She went on, "When you need further reinforcements, let me know." She turned to leave, but I interrupted her before she could step out of the map pit.

"One more thing. We're going to need another way of closing the rift in Sector 14 now Draal has gone." I knew I was touching a sore point by mentioning his name, but I had no choice. "Can we get some of your high IQ guys working on that? The sooner we can do that, the easier this is going to be to control."

Delenn nodded. "Of course. I will ask my Science Minister to contact you as soon as we have any suggestions." With that she swept out of the Comms Room, head held high and regal of posture as always.

Turning to Trulann I asked him to get a message off to the Excalibur bringing them up to date and asking them to divert at top speed to Sector 14. Top speed for the Excalibur was damned fast as she'd recently had her engines upgraded. While they may not have been as powerful as those that had run the Great Machine, they could now drive the ship through hyperspace at twice the speed of any other vessel, and they could support up to ten shots of the main gun before needing to recharge. None of the old fire then wait like a sitting duck for one minute while your enemy carves you up into little pieces!

I also asked him to contact Serenity, Jack Gideon's ship, and advise him of a change in plans, telling him to contact the Excalibur and arrange a rendezvous. Trulann nodded, and started to speak quietly into his headpiece, relaying my orders.

I checked the map that had resumed its place in front of us and turned to my wife saying, "We have at least an hour before the first White Star arrives in Sector 14." I'd noticed the bag she'd carried in with her, so I smiled and asked, "What sort of sandwiches did you make and did you bring enough for everyone?" I was trying to lighten the atmosphere, while in reality my stomach was a hard knot of tension. I doubted if I could eat a thing.

Deborah smiled and pointed to the door where my son entered, followed by another five Ranger trainees, all carrying trays piled high with food packs and beverages. So that was where Marcus had got to, no doubt prompted by his mother through their link.

My wife passed me a package and said, "Rare roast beef and horseradish, which I know you won't want to share." What can I say? Deborah knows me so well. She touched my hand and sent a wave of calm confidence, which unknotted my stomach and made me realize I was ravenous. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, so I chowed down while waiting for the first White Stars to arrive in Sector 14 and for the other shoe to drop.

I woke early that morning, and lay in bed for a few moments before deciding that I wasn't going back to sleep. So I left the bed as quietly as I could, leaving my partners sleeping. Carefully pulling a clean uniform from the wardrobe, I slid into the bathroom to wash and dress as silently as possible. Then I moved into the kitchen and started to prepare breakfast for us all.

Sometimes I enjoy the solitude of our quarters when Lily and Luke are asleep or absent. There is something very soothing about just quietly moving around, not having to speak, not having to block the thoughts of anyone around me. It gives me time to think.

What I was thinking of that morning was just how lucky I was. If anyone had ever asked me as a teenager what my life would be like, I could never have imagined being this happy. Back then, I faced a future where Psi Corps told me what career I should follow, told me where to live and told me who my mate would be when they wanted us to produce another generation of telepaths. No freedom and only one choice: the Psi Corps or sleeper drugs to block my powers. The suicide rate of those taking the sleepers didn't make it an attractive alternative.

Then everything changed. Or perhaps I should say that I changed everything. One day I was given an order by Psi Corps that I chose to disobey. I was ordered to inject sleeper drugs into a blip-a rebel telepath-and I chose not to. As a result, the blip got a telepathic signal to her colleagues who attacked Psi Corps, killing most of the senior teeps. It was the start of the end of Psi Corps and the beginning of freedom for me. I'd never stopped feeling guilty about the lives that were lost to gain me that freedom; the people whose deaths had set me free.

I was allowed to join Earthforce, the first telepath to be allowed in, but even then I faced prejudice and disillusionment. No one wanted me on their team when I graduated Officer Training, until an eccentric Captain called Matthew Gideon asked for me to join him. With Matthew as my mentor and friend, everything had changed. Because of him, I'd joined the Excalibur. Because of him, I'd met my life partners, Luke and Lily, who I love with a passion I had never imagined possible when I was young. I also had three children I adored.

Quietly opening kitchen cupboards I decided to make pancakes for breakfast; a rare treat for the three of us. Because there were only three of us on board the Excalibur now. Our children were all on Earth, studying. Dasha had graduated college and gone on to join Earthforce Academy Officer Training School the previous year. I'd nearly burst with pride at seeing him in his new uniform on the day he started. Faylinn had started graduate medical school, but recently she'd indicated that she might change her specialty to Psychiatry rather than surgery. I smiled as I thought that Matthew would be pleased to hear that. The idea of Faylinn with a scalpel in her hand terrified him!

Naima had started the long road to becoming a veterinarian. She'd always loved animals, and had often mourned not being able to have pets, living as we always had on a military starship.

As I whisked the batter I remembered the hard decision we'd made when the twins had left the Excalibur nearly three years before. We could have left with them, gone to Earth and set up home there. I was nearing fifty at the time, and had completed twenty-five years' service in Earthforce, so I could have taken my pension and retired. Or I could have taken the promotion that had been offered several times over the eighteen years I had been Captain of the Excalibur, and settled into a desk job on Earth. But when it came to it, we found that the Excalibur was our home, and we didn't want to leave.

I'd never told my partners that I'd also been concerned at the prejudice against telepaths that was still prevalent in some of the older, more senior staff within Earthforce. I didn't want that to influence their decision.

I finished the batter, placed it on the kitchen counter to rest and moved through to our living area to set the table. As I did so, my eye was caught by a hologram that stood on one of the bookcases and again I smiled. It had been taken the previous Christmas when the whole family had got together in New York.

There were ten of us in the picture. In front sat the five members of the older generation: me, Lily, Luke, Luke's sister Sara and her husband Steve Roberts. Behind us stood the younger generation; Faylinn, Dasha, Naima, and Sara's children, Nathan and Kaylee. The men wore tuxedos and the women elaborate gowns, as we'd dined at the famous Rainbow Room, on the 65th floor of 30, Rockefeller Plaza, the iconic Art Deco restaurant with its stunning views of South Manhattan. Demon would have hated it; much too high up!



But we all loved it--except for the bill at the end of the night, which I'd paid with a straight face while my heart nearly stopped in my chest. It had been worth it though. It was one of those magical evenings when everything was perfect. The food and wine were wonderful, the band excellent and the service superb. But the highlight of the evening came

after I saw Luke talking quietly to the maitre d' and slipping something into his hand. The man smiled and nodded, then made his way across to the band, where in the next pause in the music, he passed something to the band leader.

The next piece of music the band played was a tango. I stood and bowed to Lily, took her hand, and swept her onto the dance floor. I didn't care that everyone watched us as we danced and that nobody joined us on the dance floor. All I cared about was dancing with the most beautiful woman in the room, showing her off to the audience. When the music stopped the whole restaurant rose to its feet and applauded. I don't think I've ever been happier.

I was just moving back to the kitchen when my commlink sounded. I lifted it to my mouth and spoke. "Matheson."

*My XO, a Minbari Warrior named Nureel, spoke in her usual strident tone. "We have a message coming in from Minbar, coded for your attention." She sounded almost offended that I should get a message from her home planet. I sighed, wondering for the thousandth time whether I'd made a mistake in choosing her as my XO. I'd thought I could smooth off her rough edges, but I was beginning to believe that she was nothing *but* rough edges. Her head bone's certainly spikey enough! Maybe it's because she's from the Wind Sword clan, who are traditionally rather more militant than most Warriors.*

"Put it through to my screen, Lieutenant and thank you." I swear she sniffed as I signed off.

I was delighted to see my nephew, Vya, when the screen lit up. He was in his natural golden skinned and purple haired form, wearing his Ranger's uniform, and I could see from the background that he was calling from the Ranger Comms Room.

Before I could speak, Vya said, "This is formal, I'm afraid, Captain Matheson, so no time for chat. We have a major situation on our hands. Epsilon III and the Great Machine have been destroyed, the rift in Sector 14 has opened and we think alien invaders could be coming through. President Delenn has assigned the Excalibur to join the White Star fleet converging on that Sector. Your orders from her are coming through separately. I'll send the co-ordinates for your rendezvous with the White Stars to your navigation station. Get there as fast as you can. And you'll be hearing from Captain Jack Gideon. The Entil'Zha has asked him to contact you to arrange a rendezvous. He wants Captain Gideon there with you, as he has the most experience of dealing with the rift aliens."

My quiet, contemplative mood fled the room, whimpering as it departed. I acknowledged the message with a brief, "Understood," and the screen went blank.

I was just reaching for my jacket when Lily emerged from the bedroom rubbing her eyes. "What's all the noise about?"

Her beautiful red hair was tumbled about her neck and her nightgown gaped open invitingly but I resisted the urge to take her straight back to bed, limiting myself to a quick kiss, followed by, "We've had a change of orders, I'm on my way to the bridge. Pancake batter is in the kitchen."

Then I ran to the bridge, ready to get the Excalibur moving at top speed. I did some quick mental calculations as I ran, and worked out that we could probably get to Sector 14 in about four hours. I just hoped we'd arrive in time for the party.

Matthew Gideon

The next couple of hours were intense, as we waited for the Ranger White Star fleet to gather. I wasn't going to send individual ships through to the rift area one at a time; I didn't know what was waiting for them once they jumped out of hyperspace and I couldn't find out without putting one of my ships at risk. So I sent instructions for each ship to hold position on the hyperspace beacon until we had a sufficient force to tackle what could be waiting in normal space. It was fortunate that I did.

I gave overall command of the fleet in Sector 14 to one of my most experienced Shok'nas, Braknar, a Minbari Warrior from the Star Rider clan, who'd been a Ranger for over twenty years. I hated having to delegate command, but trying to remote manage a battle is a recipe for disaster. So I gritted my teeth and passed control over to Braknar. While we waited for his command to assemble, I took the opportunity to make another shift change of the Comms Operators, sending those previously on duty back to get some rest and bringing in fresh people.

When fifteen White Stars had gathered at the beacon, I gave the command to jump, instructing Braknar to broadcast an order to surrender or be destroyed to every vessel in that sector. I couldn't have my Rangers go in all guns blazing without at least offering any invader ships that chance. Based on my previous experience of these aliens, I suspected that if they'd come through, they

wouldn't be interested in surrender, but we had to make the offer or we'd be as bad as our enemies. Sometimes being honorable is a pain in the ass.

The Comms Room was soon flooded with messages. My small fleet had jumped straight into a battle. Immediately in the vicinity of the rift they found over 100 invader ships of varying sizes, all scattering as fast as they could. The White Stars chased them down in normal space, having the advantage in speed. Fortunately, the invader ships didn't appear to have the ability to open their own jump points, so they either tried to hide in the local planetary system, or they headed for the nearest jump-gate.

Braknar split his forces into three groups, with five White Stars in each, based on our best guess of how much firepower would be needed to destroy each invader ship. Over the next hour I sent through another forty five ships in clusters, and still the battle went on. As each group of five arrived at the beacon, they were sent through with orders to get co-ordinates from Braknar for their targets.

After three hours had passed since Braknar and his fleet has first jumped into Sector 14, they had destroyed every ship that had been in the area when they arrived. Over one hundred ships obliterated and we had no idea how many enemies had been killed. The scale of destruction was sickening. And that was before we counted our own losses.

Braknar had done an incredible job of minimizing the damages, but we'd still lost four White Stars, each with a crew of twenty five Rangers. Then there were the casualties on the other ships in the fleet. That accounted for another thirty six dead and many more injured, some so seriously that they would need to be brought back to Minbar for treatment, some walking wounded.

As the names of the dead flowed through my data-pad, I was nearly overwhelmed with grief and remorse. I knew those people. I'd met every one of them at some point in my time as Entil'Zha. I didn't see what I could have done to prevent their deaths, but that didn't help with the burden of guilt that goes with command. It comes with the job. I would have to find time to write to the families of every Ranger we'd lost in that battle over the next couple of days. And I knew it wasn't over yet. We had no idea how many ships had gotten through before Braknar's command had arrived. We still had to find those ships, and destroy them if they didn't surrender.

Before my grief could overpower me, I felt the soft touch of Deborah's hand on mine. I turned to look at her, as I sensed a wave of love and comfort flow through her fingers into my weary soul. I wanted to take her into my arms and hold her close, feeling her warmth, her soft strength, her comfort and her love, but that's not what commanders do in front of their troops. So I gave her a sad smile and a quick squeeze of her hand, then pulled myself together and got on with the job.

The first thing I had to do was to set up a blockade, to stop any more invaders getting through. Then I had to hunt down the survivors. Then I had to find a way to close the rift. And then I had a planet killer to find and destroy. All in a day's work for the Entil'Zha.

My day lightened considerably when Trulann leaned towards me and said, "The Excalibur has arrived in Sector 14."

Knowing that my old command had joined the fleet of White Stars guarding the rift was a huge relief. With her new engines and her enhanced main gun capabilities, she could take out pretty much

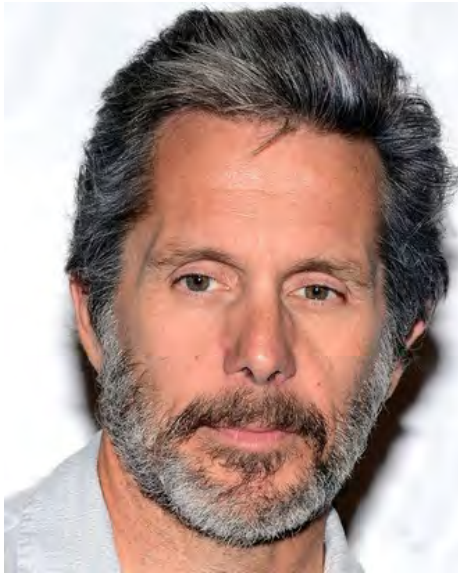
anything coming through the rupture. That would free up some of my White Stars for the hunt.

I nodded to Trulann and asked him to put the Excalibur on the projection in front of me. Then I left him and Deborah to work out which of my fleet needed to come back to Minbar for repairs, which casualties they would bring with them, and which White Stars could stay on station until we could start hunting.

John Matheson's all too scrutable face appeared in the hologram in front of me, saying, "Reporting as ordered, Entil'Zha."

I smiled and responded, "You're a little late for the party, John. Did you get a flat tire on the way there?"

John smiled back, "I think our invitation got held up in the mail. Don't tell me all the party favors have gone. We may have to take ourselves off somewhere to sulk."



I grinned as I replied, "Nah, we've saved the best treat for you specially. You get to play cat at the mouse-hole. I know how much you love cats."

Actually, John dislikes cats intensely. He's allergic to their fur and has often said he thought they had the same sort of patronizing superiority complex as Minbari Warriors. At least I think it was John who said that. Or maybe it was me and he just agreed with me. Whichever, it was true, but that didn't explain John's choice of XO, which still puzzled me. Nureel was an excellent officer, but she could make a wildcat look like a fluffy kitten.

John smiled, "Thank you so much, Entil'Zha. You know exactly how much I love a good blockade." John had ten times more patience than I have but sitting, watching a hole, waiting for something to jump out and bite you, is no-one's favorite chore.

"Is Jack with you?" I asked. I wanted to consult my alter-ego from the alternative universe before I sent my pack out on their hunt.

"Serenity is stationed on the beacon in hyperspace. I refused to let them come through until I knew the area was clear. Jack may have his ship well-armed, but he's still a civilian and I didn't want them jumping into the middle of a fire-fight."

I sucked in my breath, "That was brave of you. I bet he didn't take those orders well."

John grinned again. "He did seem a little miffed."

That made me laugh out loud, and I needed the light relief just then. "Well, send him a message that it's safe to come through." Jack's ship was unusual for a trader, having the ability to open its own jump-point, not relying on the jump gates. "Then he can dock with you and we can talk about what we do next."

John acknowledged his order and signed off; immediately the holographic projection of the ISA territory came back up. There were still a large number of red lights, indicating the White Stars that were still headed for Sector 14. I decided to let most of them continue, as that would be as good a starting point for our hunt as any, although I asked Trulann to divert two of the incoming ships to join Andy Bentley on his hunt for the planet killer.

Some of the blue lights showed our fleet already gathered near the rift and the rest were widely scattered, showing the ships I'd left at their original stations, a very thin presence at each major ISA member planet. I hoped those blue lights could soon be supplemented by the members' own fleets, but that would have to wait for Delenn to get each member's agreement. I'm glad it was her job, not mine.

I checked the clock and it was past midnight local time, but I couldn't see any possibility of getting to my bed in the near future. We were in for a long night.

I turned to Deborah and waited until she stopped speaking softly into her headpiece. I knew she was still busy, working with Trulann, organizing the return of damaged ships and injured personnel. She looked up at me and gave me one of her most loving smiles-the one that turns my legs to jelly-holding her finger up for me to wait, as she listened to the voice in her ear. Then she nodded and spoke quietly, "We have a Medical ship in orbit. Dock with them, transfer your casualties, then proceed to the dockyard where a repair team will be waiting for you."

The Rangers' Medical ship stays in orbit above Minbar most of the time. In an emergency, the ship can be moved to a battle zone, but the situation has to be dire to necessitate its movement. Having it in orbit gives us that option, whilst also allowing sick and injured Rangers returning to Minbar to be treated as quickly as possible.

Deborah keyed some entries into her pad, no doubt letting the Medical ship and the dockyard know what was on its way, then she took off her headpiece and rubbed her ear.

"Why hasn't anyone invented a comfortable earpiece by now?"

I leaned in and kissed her sore ear-yes, I know, a deplorable lapse in discipline. "Maybe you should look into that. If you could invent one, you'd make us rich beyond the dreams of avarice." I sobered a little and asked, "How are you holding up? Do you want to take a break?" I knew the emotions flying around the Comms Room as the news of our losses came in would have been difficult for her.

My wife smiled at me again, saying, "I'm fine. I took a nap with Jean-Luc this afternoon while you were working, so I'm good for a few hours yet."

"Oh, so now you're sleeping with younger men, are you? I'll have to watch out for that." I took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "If you can keep going for a while it would help. I want a conference with John, Jack and Braknar, so it would be useful if you and Trulann can keep working on the recovery operation."

Turning to Trulann I asked him if he was OK to keep liaising with Deborah on that aspect and he gave me a grave nod. "Of course, Entil'Zha. Leave that to Mrs. Gideon and me. I will arrange for the

conference to be set up in Meeting Room 1 as soon as we are notified that Jack Gideon has arrived on the Excalibur."

I knew exactly what Trulann was up to. First he wanted me away from the map table-which happens to be one of my favorite toys-so he could use it for his own work. Trulann dearly loves that map table and hates it when I want to use it for conferences. Second, he was getting me to a room where I could sit down. After hours on my feet in the map pit, I was truly grateful for that, so I nearly forgave him for stealing my toy.

"Thank you, Trulann, that's very considerate of you." He knew exactly what I meant and gave the smallest hint of a smile in acknowledgement. I turned to Deborah and said softly, "As soon as you're done, join me in Meeting Room 1 but make sure you stay out of view. I'd like you to listen in, but I don't want Braknar seeing you there. You know what he's like." Deborah smiled and nodded; she's a lot more tolerant of some of the Minbari Warriors than I am.

I really have a great staff, and I don't tell them often enough how much I appreciate them. I was particularly appreciative when Deborah stooped, reached into her bag, and passed me another roast beef and horseradish sandwich. Have I told you how useful it is having an empath for a wife? She even knows when I'm hungry.

Jack Gideon

By the time I arrived on the bridge of the Excalibur I was so mad I was ready to take a swing at John Matheson. Then I saw the Minbari Warrior looming over his shoulder, and discretion definitely seemed the better part of valor. This woman looked like she would take Xena, Warrior Princess apart as a light workout before breakfast, then move on up through Conan the Barbarian, finishing off with Superman before starting work for the day. And yes, I watch too many old movies. So sue me.

So, as I'm not a Drazi-I know what discretion means-I gritted my teeth and said politely, "A word in private if you please, Captain Matheson."

John smiled at me, obviously knowing exactly what I was thinking, and said, "Of course, Captain Gideon. Would you care to accompany me to the conference room?" He pointed towards the back of the bridge, as if I didn't know where the damned conference room was, then said to his XO, "Nureel, you have command. Call me if you need me."

The Minbari gave a salute that would have knocked her senseless if she hadn't had a head bone. As it was, I couldn't really see how she didn't end up with her hand impaled on her own bone spikes. What the hell was John doing with one of those hard-assed, condescending, patronizing, supercilious idiots with an inflated sense of their own importance as his XO? Another mystery to add to the list.

As the doors slid closed behind us, I span around, ready to let rip at John, when I saw he was grinning from ear to ear. "So what's amusing you, Captain? Find something funny about the current situation do you?" I can get pretty snotty myself when I want.

"Sorry, Jack, but your face was a picture when you saw Nureel. I know exactly what you think of Minbari Warriors, and I tend to forget that my Matthew Gideon has learned to live with them, but you haven't had to."

I couldn't help but grin back. This man may not have been my John Matheson, but his alternate in my original universe had known me as well as this John Matheson knew his Matthew Gideon. OK, I know, it's confusing having two of everyone, but you're just going to have to keep up. That's the whole point about alternate parallel universes. They're the same until they're not.

"As far as I recall, John, you pretty much agreed with my views on the Warriors, so what made you pick one for your XO?"

John shook his head, suddenly formal, "Long story and not for today. Entil'Zha Gideon and his local commander are waiting for us to join them. Please, take a seat, and we'll link ourselves into the call."

I held my hand up to stop him as he went to raise his commlink to his mouth. "Just a minute, Captain. Off the record, I wanted to let you know that I understood your reasons for having me hold Serenity on the beacon in hyperspace until you could be sure this region was clear of enemy hostiles. But come on, John, you're a telepath for God's sake! Surely you knew how much it meant to me to be able to take a crack at those bastards?"

John's face fell into a sad smile. "Of course I know that, Jack. And I know that you never got the satisfaction of destroying those Shadow hybrids that attacked the Cerberus in your universe as Matthew did in this one. But if I know Matthew, you're going to get plenty of chances to get some revenge on the invaders. And I'd prefer you did that from here, on board the Excalibur, rather than risk getting you and Angel killed and Serenity destroyed. Lily would never forgive me if that happened."

I snorted and said, "Serenity isn't that easy to destroy, John, not with the way I have her armed, and any ship that has Angeli on board is a lot safer than you might think."

John nodded. "I know all about Angel's powers, Jack, I was linked to the merge in the sky above Nabula, remember? But I also know how dangerous it is for her to use those powers, even merged with her sisters and having their help to control herself. With Ilas gone, we don't even know if the merge is possible anymore, so I don't want you putting yourself, your ship or Angel into the firing line." He narrowed his eyes and stared me down. "Not on my watch."

I don't think I've ever been as proud of John as I was at that moment. I just wished that my John Matheson had had the chance to live and grow into the man I saw before me.

"Understood, but we'll have to agree to differ on that point. But you have us on board now-and by the way, I really like those new docking facilities of yours; Serenity just won't fit inside the Landing Bay-so let's see just what opportunities Matt is going to give me."

John nodded, and lifted his commlink to his face. "Comms, please feed Entil'Zha Gideon's and Shok'na Braknar's comms channels through to the screen in the conference room. Thank you."

We turned to the screen which immediately lit up with two images. One showed a Minbari Warrior (it seemed they were everywhere) who I assumed was Braknar, the other showed Matt Gideon reclined back in his chair with his feet on a table, turning a data crystal between his fingers. I shook my head, leaned forward and peered closely at that image.

"Matt, what the hell have you done to your face?" I hadn't seen Matt for over a year, as the sisters kept in touch via their link, and neither Matt nor I like to be reminded that there's another version of 'me' walking around. We avoid each other if we can. I don't know what it says about me that I don't much like the alternative version of myself. No, you don't have to tell me, I'm fine not knowing, thanks.



Matt stroked his beard and grinned. "I think it makes me look distinguished." I thought it made him look like a down and out, but before I could say so, he went on, "And not shaving means I get an extra fifteen minutes in bed in the morning. I'm sure you can imagine how pleasant that is." He gave me a leer that was worthy of a true Gideon and I had to laugh.

"So what does Demon think of it? Doesn't she object to the hairs tickling her..." I paused judiciously, "...whatever?"

Matt refused to rise to my innuendo and laughed again, "She's OK with the full beard, but when I shaved my chin and just left the mustache, she said I looked like a porn star, so I should either grow a full beard or shave it all off. I didn't ask how she knows what porn stars look like, as I'm afraid she just might tell me, so I grew the chin hair back again." He reached up to rub his beard again.

All the while this was going on, I could see John grinning next to me and Braknar looking superior, patronizing, condescending, you know the rest, in the other half of the screen.

Matt lifted his legs off the desk, pulled his chair forward and adjusted his facial expression. Time to get down to business. He gave a summary of the events to date, and an overview of where the Ranger forces were currently located. While he was doing so, Braknar sent through another feed to the view-screen, showing details of the battle he'd fought on arrival in the sector. It had been brutal but I'd seen worse in my own universe. A lot worse.

Matt finished his overview, saying, "You'll have sixty seven more White Stars coming in over the next twelve hours, so I want to discuss with you three the best distribution and use of the forces that we'll have built up in that Sector by the end of that time." He looked straight at me and said, "Jack, I need you to tell us about these aliens. I fought some of them eighteen years ago when the rift last opened, but you had much greater experience with them. For a start, do they have ships with jump capabilities?"

I nodded. "Yes. For roughly every ten of their smaller ships, they'll have a command ship that can open jump points for themselves. If you had over a hundred of the smaller ships in and around this system when you first arrived, you should bank on at least ten of the command ships having come through; then they'll have jumped into hyperspace."

"Damn. I'll need to spread my forces wider than I'd hoped." I saw Matt press the data crystal he'd been playing with into a recorder in front of him, then he said, "OK, tell us everything you can about how those command ships fight, how powerful they are, how many crew they have, what their weaknesses are and any other damned thing you can think of that might help."

I talked for over an hour, drawing on many very unhappy memories of encounters with the invaders in my own universe. I emptied my brain and gave Matt everything. He, John and Braknar only interrupted occasionally, asking pertinent questions to clarify points I'd made. At the end of that hour I felt drained, physically and emotionally, and I could see John was looking at me with some concern.

I leaned forward and scrubbed my face with my hands, saying, "That's the lot, Matt, that's everything I can think of. Do any of you have any more questions?" I hoped they didn't as I felt completely wrung out. Reliving some of the events I'd tried not to think about for eighteen years had been difficult to say the least. I just wanted to go back to my ship, take my wife into my arms, and sleep for a day or so.

"Just one more thing Jack, but I think we're nearly done." I almost groaned aloud at that, but waved for Matt to continue. "John can brief you on the recent upgrades we've made to the Excalibur, then I'd like your recommendations on how many White Stars we should leave in that sector with the Excalibur to make sure no more invaders get through. Once you, John and Braknar have agreed on the number, Braknar can take the rest of the White Stars and start hunting down those command ships."

Matt turned to the Minbari and said, "Braknar, get the ships you have already spread out around the system, and start searching for traces of the jump-points that the invaders used. Once we have an idea of where they were when they jumped, we can start tracking them through hyperspace. Liaise with Captain Matheson on keeping a close enough eye on the rift while you're doing that to give him support if anything else comes through." He stood and straightened his Ranger uniform, then said, "Let's reconvene in eight hours, gentlemen. Get what rest you can until then."

The comms link to Minbar was cut, and just for a moment I thought, [The bastard is going to bed and to sleep for the next eight hours, leaving us to sort things out here in Sector 14.] Then I remembered how many Rangers had died that day and how many letters Matt would have to write. He wouldn't be getting any sleep that night, far from it.

19th May 2281

Deborah Gideon

It was well into the early hours of Tuesday morning before I slid silently into Meeting Room 1, careful to stay out of range of the transmission, as Matthew had asked. I saw my husband's eyes

flicker in my direction and he gave me the tiniest of nods to acknowledge my arrival, something only I would notice, then went back to listening to Jack, who was talking at length.

I can't sense emotions over a view-screen, but I didn't need to be an empath to know how painful Jack's memories were, and the effort he was having to make to give the information we now needed. By the time he finished, he looked completely drained. My heart went out to him, and I wanted nothing more than to reach out and soothe his pain.

It's always difficult for me to see Jack looking unhappy as he looks so like Matthew. I find it hard not to allow some of the love I feel for my husband to overspill, just a little, into my feelings about Jack. But I'm always careful to hide those emotions, as neither Matthew nor Angel would be happy if they knew how I feel.

Matthew gave his final orders then signed off and closed the comm channel, before turning to me and asking, "So what did you think of what you heard and saw there?"

I gathered my thoughts for a moment then said, "Jack found it hard to give you everything you needed, but he persevered. I think you got everything he has to give. John found it difficult sitting next to Jack while that was going on," I gestured at the screen, "but like Jack, he persevered. Braknar..."

I paused, trying to sum up what I'd seen on Braknar's face as he'd listened to Jack. "Braknar was pretty disdainful of Jack's pain, but he's also eager to get out and fight the enemy." I didn't like the Warrior Ranger much, but I tried not to let that cloud my judgement. "He was a good choice as Commander of the Sector 14 fleet. He'll do a good job cleaning up out there."

As I mentioned earlier, there are some Rangers who aren't happy with the position I hold, so close to the Entil'Zha but not a Ranger myself. But they would be even less happy if I were made a Ranger, despite my having passed all the necessary tests at one time or another. Most of those who felt that way were Warrior Minbari. But then most of those who resented me also felt that only Minbari should be Rangers. So I tried not to take it personally, and I did my best to smooth over any difficulties with those individuals, of whom Braknar was one.

Matthew smiled at me, apparently aware of the effort I had made to be fair. "I know Braknar can be a pain in the ass, but he's a good commander. Now what went on in the Comms Room after I left?"

I gave him a quick summary, "Trulann and I got the three White Stars too damaged to repair in situ on their way back here, carrying all the seriously wounded. We then changed the shift of comms operators again and Trulann went off duty. He called Sech Rastenn to take over from him."

Rastenn had been a Ranger for nearly thirty years and had recently been promoted to the rank of Chief Sech, or Teacher of the Anla'Shok. "I asked Rastenn if he would allow Marcus to spend his free time at our home over the next few days of this crisis, and he agreed. Marcus will also be sleeping at home for a while, so he can give Ben a few hours off and look after Jean-Luc in the evenings and overnight."

Matthew had been nodding and smiling as I spoke. "Good, it's about time Marcus took his turn on diaper duty. And if we don't get some help for Ben, we could end up owing her a fortune in overtime." His smile faded as he picked up his data-pad from the table in front of him and sighed, "Guess I'd better get started on these letters."

Writing to the families of people who died under his command was a job Matthew hated but he was assiduous in completing his duty. However, right then he looked exhausted and emotionally drained. I knew that listening to Jack had taken its toll on my husband as well as on his alter-ego.

I stood and moved around the table to join him, then gently tried to remove the data-pad from his hand. "Not tonight. It can wait until later. It's nearly dawn outside and you need rest, or you won't be able to function properly. We'll need to go up to the Hospital ship at some time in the next couple of days. You can work on the letters while we're in transit."

I was dreading that visit, knowing how much pain and stress would be saturating the atmosphere of that ship, knowing that, try as I might, I wouldn't be able to block it all out. But the Entil'Zha would have to visit his wounded Rangers and where he went, I went.

Matthew resisted for a moment, and then let me take the data-pad and place it in my bag. "You're right, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to sleep for a while. Too much adrenaline."

I took his hand and pulled him to his feet, saying, "I'm sure I can find a way of calming you. Now let's go home." Matthew chuckled as I pulled him through the outer doors into the light of the dawn that was just breaking outside. He paused for a moment, looking east.

"It's a beautiful dawn. The view from Deleenn's balcony will be amazing today."

A wave of pain and sorrow escaped me and Matthew turned to me, frowning. "What caused that?"

I closed my eyes and squeezed his hand tightly. "Deleenn always watches the dawn from her balcony. It's where she said goodbye to John Sheridan, so she goes there every day at the same time she last saw him, mourning him." My eyes had filled with tears at the memory of Deleenn's overwhelming loss and grief. How did she find the strength to go on bearing that weight of pain?



Matthew pulled me tightly into his arms, saying nothing, just letting his love wash over me until my tears dried. I shivered in the light breeze that swept across the plateau at that early hour. Of course, Matthew sensed it immediately. "You're cold. Here, take this." He shrugged out of his leather jacket, pulled it around my shoulders, and then took me back into his arms. The warmth and smell of his jacket and his own spicy scent enveloped me and my sadness retreated.

I looked up at my husband and said, "Come on, let's go home."

He led me to his motorbike, swung himself into the front seat, and then patted the seat behind him. I tucked my skirts up and clambered on behind him, giving him a glimpse of my stocking tops as I did so. Matthew smiled and ogled at me, then said, "Hold on tight."

I leaned forward, pulling myself tightly against his back, burying my face into his neck and once again inhaling the scent of him that I loved so much. It took less than two minutes to get back to the house, then Matthew helped me off the bike and held onto my hand as we crept inside and up the stairs.

Once we were in our bedroom, I went to hang Matthew's jacket in the wardrobe while he closed the door carefully behind us, completing the circuit of the telepathic screen that surrounded our room. When I turned, he was leaning back against the door, with his arms crossed and that leering smile back on his face.

"So what else do you have on under there?"

I quickly stripped out of my t-shirt and skirt, standing before him, wearing nothing but my black lace bra and panties, with my stockings.

I didn't wear the bra and panties for long, but the stockings stayed on for a while...

Matthew Gideon

I woke suddenly and reaching out, realized that the space next to me in bed was empty. I lay still for a moment, then heard the sound of the shower from the bathroom. Checking the time, I found I'd slept six hours straight through. After making love to my wife, I think I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

I stretched and recognized that Deborah had been right-as she usually was-and I'd needed that sleep to recharge the batteries. So now not only were the batteries charged, but the main gun was on line and ready to be fired. I threw back the covers and leaped out of bed, moving rapidly towards the bathroom. As I opened the door, Deborah turned around and looked at me through the transparent shower screen, giving me a seductive smile.

A spilt second later I was inside the shower and a second after that I was inside her. We do like to start the day with a little soapy fun.

Once we were back in the bedroom, I dried myself off, toweled my hair roughly, then got dressed, all while Deborah was still trying to untangle her wet hair. She was grimacing as she sat naked on a stool in front of the dressing table mirror, tugging at the tangles with a comb. "I swear I'm going to cut it really short!"

I moved to stand behind her, and then leaned forward to kiss her neck while moving my hand round to her breast. I tweaked her nipple as I said, "I'll divorce you if you do." Then I ducked and ran for the door as she threw the comb at me. "Pax! I'll get breakfast started, although it's more like lunch now."

I was whistling tunelessly to myself as I ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. All was definitely not well with the world, and the days ahead were going to be tough, but just then I felt good. Entering the kitchen I found Ben giving Jean-Luc his lunch. The baby started waving at me and bouncing in his chair, so I went over and kissed the top of his head, careful to avoid the food he had smeared all over his face. Jean-Luc has the same table manners as his father at that age.

I said, "Hi Ben. Thanks for taking care of Jean-Luc all last night. We've got some extra help for you later today. Marcus will be coming over as soon as he finishes classes, and then he'll be stopping overnight. So make sure you leave all the really stinky diapers for him to deal with."

I was rummaging in the refrigerator as I spoke, and found a pack of bacon. A hot bacon sandwich sounded like the perfect compromise between breakfast and lunch. I laid the strips of bacon on a tray and pushed it into the oven, as Ben laughed and replied, "It's not a problem, Matt. The baby was really good last night; no trouble at all. But it will be good to have company this evening. Company I can hold a conversation with, that is."

There was a slightly predatory gleam in Ben's eye as she spoke and I wondered whether Marcus was aware that he had an admirer. Ben is an attractive woman in her thirties, and I knew she'd been married and divorced twice already. I silently resolved to make sure Marcus was up to date with his contraceptive shots this time; we didn't need any more little accidents filling up our home.

I got a pot of coffee going and poured two glasses of juice, then took bread out and was doing my usual job of hacking off doorstep sized slices when Deborah entered the room. When she saw what I was up to she moved across quickly and took the knife away from me, saying, "I'll just cut my own slices, Matthew, I prefer them a little thinner than your doorsteps."

"Suit yourself. I'll call Trulann and get the conference call set up in my office rather than going down to the Comms Room just yet. Do you want to sit in again?"

Deborah shook her head. "It probably wouldn't be tactful. I'll go on down to the Admin center, make a start on the casualty report and get an update on the damaged ships. By the time you get down there, I should have everything ready for you."

I pulled her close and kissed her cheek, then said, "And I thought I was marrying a dumb blonde; just shows how wrong I can be." That earned me a thump on the arm.

I called Trulann while Deborah pulled our lunches together, and then ate quickly. After one more goodbye kiss, my wife left the house and I went into my office. A quick check of the clock showed I still had fifteen minutes before the call from the Excalibur was due, so I swiftly keyed my commlink to contact Rastenn. The Minbari answered promptly, and I asked him for a fast update on any changes that had happened during my absence.

Rastenn said, "Captain Matheson can bring you up to date on the events in Sector 14. Other than that, all ships have arrived on schedule. We now have one hundred and eighteen ships in that area, a further twenty-one still in hyperspace on their way there, three on their way to Minbar for repairs, three in pursuit of the supposed 'planet killer' ship and the remaining one hundred and twenty five White Stars are holding station at their original postings. We also received an update from the shipyard. The first of the new upgraded White Stars will be commissioned for service in two days' time. They will then be sending out an additional upgraded ship every other day thereafter until all eleven of the new ships are in service."

That was really good news. The new White Stars had faster, more powerful engines, and they also carried the equivalent of the original Excalibur main gun. Like my old ship, they could only fire once, and then had to wait for recharge, but we could use them in groups to protect each other. I knew this

was going to be a long fight, and we were going to need all the resources we could get hold of. I had plans for the immediate use of the first new ship off the line, but I kept that to myself for the moment.

"Thank you, Rastenn. And thanks for taking over at short notice last night."

The Minbari was silent for a moment, and I just knew that he had held his fingers together to form a triangle and bowed, even though I couldn't see him. "You are most welcome, Entil'Zha. It is an honor to serve."

I cut the commlink connection, then waited for the conference call to come through. The screen in my office soon lit up to show John in one half and Braknar in the other. There was no sign of Jack. I leaned forward and asked, "Is Jack joining us?"

John shook his head. "Once we'd completed our plans I sent him back to Serenity to rest. There wasn't much more he could do for us."

I gritted my teeth and tried not to show how much that idea annoyed me. Because Jack going back to his ship to rest meant that he'd probably be going to bed, and his wife would probably go with him and... [Don't be a jerk, Matt, what Jack and Angel do in the privacy of their own ship is none of your business.] But I couldn't help feeling a little smug that Serenity wasn't big enough to carry large water tanks, so no soapy fun for Jack. And yes, that makes me a complete bastard, but I don't care.



"So what happened during the last eight hours?" Braknar and John updated me on events. During that time they had fought off two incursions through the rift. The first consisted of two command ships with twenty three smaller ships around them. John had taken each command ship out with single shots from the Excalibur main gun, leaving the White Stars under Braknar's command to clean up the rest. A couple of hours later another command ship had come through with eight smaller companions. They'd been despatched with brutal efficiency.

"We've kept broadcasting a surrender signal at all times, Entil'Zha." Braknar looked disapproving that we'd even given the enemy that small chance. "Captain Gideon assured us that the enemy understand English and Minbari and can respond in those languages if they choose, so we know our broadcasts are being understood."

I nodded and asked, "Have you found the points the command ships jumped from as yet?"

Braknar nodded. "We found evidence of thirteen jump points having been opened in the last day." That's a Minbari day of roughly twenty hours of course, but that still covered the period since Draal had sent his last message and the rift had opened. So we knew we had at least thirteen enemy command ships out in the galaxy somewhere. Now we needed to hunt them down.

John continued with his briefing. "Based on Jack's information and our experience overnight, Braknar plans to have twenty-two of his White Stars remaining with the Excalibur to fight any new ships coming through the rift." Minbari work their numbers on base eleven, hence the odd total.

"The White Stars will focus on the smaller ships, while we take out the command ships before they can jump."

Braknar picked up the next phase. "I plan to divide the White Stars currently here into groups of nine, each of which will pursue a single command ship into hyperspace, following the trails we have discovered. This will leave the Excalibur initially with only one White Star for support, but the remaining twenty-one will arrive shortly to make up the numbers needed. Captain Matheson assures me that the Excalibur can cope on their own with their Starfuries until their numbers are supplemented."

They had things worked out well and I didn't see the need to change any of their plans except in one small respect. "John, if you could make do with the support of twenty White Stars rather than twenty-two, I'd like to send another couple of ships to back up Andy Bentley in his hunt for the planet killer. That will give him five ships, which would make me feel more comfortable."

John nodded immediately. "Twenty is fine by me, Entil'Zha. We could probably make do with half that number, but just in case we get a sudden incursion of multiple command ships with their supporting vessels coming through in large numbers, we thought we'd be cautious. We don't want to get caught with our pants down."

I smiled at John's caution and said, "Thank you, gentlemen, let's get this show on the road. Keep us updated on progress and any changes. Good luck and happy hunting."

Braknar and John both saluted smartly and signed off, leaving me staring at a blank screen. I mentally ticked off my checklist of things I had needed to do.

Set up a blockade to stop any more invaders getting through - done.

Hunt down the enemy that had scattered into hyperspace - under way.

Find the planet killer and destroy it - started, but a long way from completion. I had absolutely no idea how we were going to fight a ship that could destroy a planet, but I'd worry about that once we'd found the damned thing.

Find a way to close the rift - delegated to the Minbari brains trust. Nothing I could do on that front until Delenn's Science Minister reported back to me.

I pondered for a moment, then decided that a little pressure from the Entil'Zha couldn't do any harm. I keyed my commlink and asked to be put through to the Science Minister's office. While I waited, I planned how to light a fire under his butt.

Angelique Gideon

I don't think I've ever seen Jack as angry as he was when John told him to hold Serenity in hyperspace and wait for the all clear before we jumped into Sector 14. Just for a moment the look in his eyes and the way he was chewing his lip brought memories of Lucas flooding back to me, and I was scared. I pulled myself together quickly, telling myself, [This isn't Lucas, this is Jack, the man you love and who loves you!]

I tried to calm him by talking reasonably, but it didn't work. I tried getting angry and upset, but that didn't work either. Finally, I tried seduction, touching him, leaning into him and all that got me was, "Don't go there, Angelique. This isn't the time or place."

I ran from Serenity's bridge in tears and I didn't know whether I was crying because I was mad or sad. Or both. Usually Jack would follow me if I was upset, but not this time. I went back to our quarters and tried to calm myself by taking a long, hot bath. One of the things I love about Serenity, that few other people realize, is that we designed her to have oversized water tanks and recycling facilities, so there is always enough hot water for a bath or shower. But only enough for one at a time, so we always had to share...

*On this occasion, I was quite happy to bathe alone. After a long soak, I dried off and dressed again, choosing leather pants and a red t-shirt. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but smile. Yes, I looked older than I had when I left Eriadne, but not as much as I should have done. Demon and Lily hadn't aged quickly either. It seemed something the Vorlons had done to us had slowed the aging process. So although I knew I was in my mid-forties (that's in years I'd lived, rather than years since I was born; if you counted that way I was *much* older!) and had a white streak running through my hair, I thought I could easily pass for ten years younger. Turning sideways I looked at my body objectively. It was still slim and taut and I work damned hard to keep it that way.*

I'm not a vain person and generally I don't spend much time in front of the mirror, but I wanted to be sure that my husband felt the same passion for me as I did for him. But just at that moment, I wasn't sure he deserved the efforts I made.

I had just picked up a book when the comm screen in our cabin lit up. Jack's face glowered out at me. "We're about to jump, then we'll be docking with the Excalibur. I'm going straight across to speak to John."

I wondered whether John would survive that encounter, but tried to smile as I asked, "Shall I come with you?"

Jack shook his head. "Not this time. I'll be briefing them on the invaders." With that he cut the connection.

I threw the book at the screen and yelled, uselessly, "Well damn you, Jack Gideon! You go off and play with the boys, why don't you? Leave the little woman at home to cook your dinner!"

I was being a little unfair but it felt good. Well, I was damned if I was staying home alone. I waited for the peculiar inside out sensation that indicated we'd jumped into normal space, then a little longer as the thumps and bumps against Serenity's hull showed we'd docked successfully with the Excalibur. Then I waited a little more, just to make sure his lordship had cleared out of my way.

While I waited, I used my mental link to call my sister, Lily. [/Lily, are you awake?/] The almost incoherent excitement that flooded my mind made it clear that my sister was indeed conscious. I told her I was coming across if she had time for a visit, and her excitement grew even more.

*[/That would be wonderful! I'm free this afternoon, so why don't you come over for some lunch and then we can have a good catch up./] I was pleased that at least one person on the Excalibur wanted to see me. I considered whether I should just teleport myself over to Lily's quarters, then decided against it. It was an unnecessary risk, and while I landed on target 99% on the time, there was always that 1% chance that I'd mess up. I didn't want to teleport myself into a vacuum. Yes, I *have* learned to be less impulsive and reckless over the years. Demon would be proud of me! And surprised. Very, very surprised.*

So I made my way to the cargo bay airlock, and looked through at the tube linking us to the Excalibur. We were tucked under the cowling at the center of the ship, between two of the enormous fins. Getting across through the linking corridor would be interesting.

I opened Serenity's airlock, braced myself, then stepped into the tube. It was like jumping out of an airplane. Suddenly, I was weightless as I left my ship's gravity field. The airlock door closed behind me and I pushed off with my feet, floating free through the five meter long tunnel. That was the easy bit. It was what happened at the other end that got tricky. I'd done this a couple of times before when we'd docked with other ships, so I knew what to do, but it still took care and concentration.



The Excalibur's airlock had a small projecting shelf, with two circles painted on it, and arrows on the door pointing to the circles. There were also handles either side of the door. I carefully orientated myself with the arrows and then pulled myself down using the handles, until my feet touched the circles. Then, still holding on with one hand, I pushed the control next to the airlock, which connected me to the Excalibur's bridge.

The speaker next to the control flashed green, and I leaned towards it, saying, "Angelique Gideon, requesting permission to come aboard." Then I quickly grabbed the other handle so I was holding on firmly with both hands.

With a loud buzz, the airlock door started to open. Taking a deep breath I stepped through the aperture and the gravity hit me like a ton of bricks. My knees trembled and might have given way had I not been holding myself up with my hands wrapped tightly around the handles. Going from weightless to one full Earth gravity in one step is no joke.

Once aboard the Excalibur I made my way towards Lily's quarters, my mind filled with memories of the years I'd spent living on this ship. She had been my first real home after Eriadne. For four years I'd been mostly happy here although all through that time there had been an underlying loneliness that had pervaded my life. Oh don't get me wrong, I'd had a few flings during those years-one of them with the man who later became my husband, Jack, before we'd said terrible things to each other and he'd left me, temporarily, thank the Goddess-but none of them had given me the real love I needed.

I found the bullet car easily enough, but once I disembarked the changes in the layout since the last refit of the ship confused me-my sense of direction has never been my strong point-so I had to ask directions to the Captain's quarters. When I finally found them, I buzzed at the door which opened quickly and Lily flung herself through, hugging me tightly until I laughingly begged for mercy.

Lily dragged me into her rooms, which looked strange somehow, as they seemed almost too tidy. In the years I'd lived aboard the Excalibur, Lily had been raising three small children, so her quarters had always had toys and books around the place. Now those children were on Earth, studying, and my sister's quarters showed their absence.

Lily had home-schooled her children when they'd been on board, and after they'd left for Earth, she'd carried on teaching the children of the other families that now lived on board. Not many families, as most of the crew didn't have children, but enough to keep Lily occupied now her nest was empty.

It had been a few months since Lily and I had last seen each other in person, although we linked regularly, so we had lots to catch up on over lunch. Afterwards, we moved to the sofa in her living area, and I started to speak about some of the less pleasant things that had happened since we had last met.

"Losing Baby nearly broke my heart. I know he was over twelve years old, which is a decent age for a Beagle, but I still miss him terribly." My adorable puppy had died in his sleep six months before. "We knew his heart was failing, and he slept more and more, until one day he just didn't wake up." Tears streamed down my face as I spoke and Lily took me into her arms, not saying anything, just holding me.

I pulled myself together a bit then went on, "Harry somehow got it into his head that it was his fault, and he looked so sad and afraid every time he looked at me, that eventually Jack asked him whether he would prefer to work with G'Tan and No'Kar on the Angel's Rest. He moved over there the next time we met up. I still miss the big softy." Harry had been my friend at a time when I'd desperately needed one. I would always be grateful to him for how he'd helped me escape from Lucas Buck.

I wondered for a moment if it was losing Baby and Harry that had started me thinking more about the child I'd abandoned. Somehow, when they were both with me, I'd managed to push those thoughts aside, but they'd never quite gone away. Now my furry Baby and my overgrown child were gone, I couldn't help remembering the other child I'd lost.

I was just rubbing new tears away when the screen in Lily's quarters lit up. We both turned to see Jack's face on the screen. I caught my breath at how exhausted he looked. His voice was strained with fatigue as he moved his gaze around, trying to see the whole of the room. "Lily? Is Angelique there?"

I moved to stand in front of the screen where he could see me, "I'm here, Jack."

He gave me a sad smile. "I'm heading back to Serenity. I wondered..." He broke off, seemingly unsure of how to continue.

"I'll meet you at the airlock." The screen went blank and I turned to Lily. "I'm sorry to rush off like this but..." I didn't know how to continue either.

Lily smiled at me. "But Jack needs you. Off with you, now!" She shooed me out of her rooms and I ran to the bullet car tube, somehow managing not to get lost this time. I arrived back at the airlock just as Jack reached it from the opposite direction.

For a moment we stood, just looking at each other, then Jack lifted his hand to my face, brushing my cheek as he said, "You've been crying."

He looked concerned so I tried to smile. "I was just telling Lily about Baby and Harry."

I could see the relief in Jack's eyes. He took me into his arms and kissed my forehead. "I was worried it was because I'd been a bit of a bastard earlier."

*I looked up at him and lifted myself on tiptoes to kiss his lips softly. "You were a *lot* of a bastard earlier, but I forgive you. You look exhausted, what have you been doing?"*

Jack pressed the airlock controls open then guided me through with his arm around my waist. "Remembering things I'd rather forget. Things I'd buried deep inside since I came over to this universe. Things that were painful to dig up again. But Matt needed to know whatever I could tell him about these invaders, so it had to be done."

We maneuvered ourselves back onto Serenity, all the time with Jack's arm around me. When we were back in the cargo bay I asked him, "Have you eaten? Lily gave me lunch, but I could..." Before I could continue, Jack closed my mouth with a bruising kiss, tightening his hold on me until it almost hurt.

When he finally released me, my husband leaned back and said quietly, "Today brought back memories of everything I lost. But I've also remembered how much I've found and I never want to lose that. I couldn't bear that, love. Never leave me, Angelique. Promise me, no matter how angry I get or how stupidly I behave, you won't leave me without giving me the chance to make it better."

I looked up at him, my eyes wide with astonishment, "How could you ever imagine I would leave you, Jack? Do you really think I'm so stupid that I'd let you go? That's never going to happen."

Jack laughed, swept me into his arms and carried me to our cabin, where he proceeded to show me just how sorry he was for his earlier bad behavior. Thoroughly. Repeatedly. Until I wasn't sure that either of us would be walking straight for a few days. We were so busy rocking our ship that we didn't even notice the battles going on outside.

Matthew Gideon

Having called Deborah and got an update on the latest casualty and damages position, I told her I was staying in my office to work on the letters I had to write, but to get Trulann to call me if anything significant came through. Having set everything I could in motion, I no longer had any excuses to avoid my duty.

So I started at the top of my long list, with "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter. I was your son's commanding officer. Scott was a good man, and a much valued Ranger, who died doing his duty..."

The list went on, with letters to parents, partners and children; to humans, Minbari, Drazi, Gaim, Brakiri, Hyach, Vree and Abbai. Every species whose members had joined the Rangers had lost someone in the battle for Sector 14. Even a solitary pak'ma'ra had died, but I had no idea how to contact a next of kin for him/her, or even if the pak'ma'ra had such a concept, as s/he had given no details when s/he had joined the Anla'Shok.

Soon after I started work, Deborah brought me a coffee, kissed me gently, then asked me if I wanted her to stay and help. I took her hand and squeezed it, then chased her out of the room. I knew how much she would want to share my burden if she could, but also how much she would share my pain if I let her. I didn't want her feeling my emotions just then.

After six hours of dictation, too much coffee and only breaking off to receive updates from Trulann, I was just about half way through my list. Deborah stuck her head around the door, telling me that I should take a break and join her and Marcus for dinner. I told her I'd follow her in a moment, and had laid down my data-pad ready to leave the office, when the viewscreen lit up and a voice emerged.

"You know, Matthew, you can take a duty too far. Please be sensible and take a break, as your beautiful wife has suggested."

I turned to the screen, which was displaying a coruscating waterfall of lights, and said, "Alwyn, why the picture show? Are you ashamed of how you look at the moment?"

Our friendly, family Technomage had a habit of changing his appearance every time we saw him. Sometimes older and jovial, sometimes younger and smiling, often middle aged, dark and dangerous. Who knew what he might come up with next?

The viewscreen cleared and the image showed one of Alwyn's more threatening faces, with the usual blank background behind him that meant he didn't want to reveal his location.

"I am never ashamed of anything, dear boy, surely you've learned that by now?" He was right of course. Shameless was exactly the right word for him, and for that dragon familiar of his.

"Talking of shameless, where's Ishtar?" I couldn't help but smile as a golden face appeared above Alwyn's shoulder, and she chirruped a greeting at me. I chose to believe that it was reasonable friendly, but I was glad she was at the other end of a viewscreen. I still have a bad habit of rubbing my left ear when Ishtar is around.

I said hello to the dragon-I know, that's a crazy way to start a sentence-then went on, "How are Sarah and Jaysen? Are they with you?"

"No, they are in a safe place. I didn't want to risk taking them with me this time. Things got ugly last time, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen again." Alwyn was being cryptic but there was nothing new about that.

"Taking them with you where? Ugly how? And who with?"

"With whom, dear boy, with whom. Good heavens, what are they teaching instead of grammar in schools these days?" He shook his head, then sobered and said, "Ugly with the Technomage Circle. I went back to try and talk them into a sensible course of action, but I have failed. Again."

That didn't sound good. Most of the Technomages had been in hiding for over thirty years, withdrawing at the time of the Shadow War. I was one of very few who knew that Technomage technology had been provided by the Shadows, and when they retreated beyond the Rim, the Technomages had been left stranded, unable to make new Mages, hoarding their limited resources.



I knew that Alwyn had attempted to persuade them to rejoin the rest of the galaxy on several occasions, the most recent being back in '84, when they had held him, along with Sarah and Jaysen, for several months before letting them go. Alwyn had never explained why he had been detained or why they'd then been released, but that was about to change.

"So if they're staying in hiding, nothing has changed then." I've often found with Alwyn that asking questions is pointless, but making bald statements frequently provokes a response.

"I didn't say I was trying to get them to rejoin the galaxy. I said I was trying to talk them into a sensible course of action. I would have preferred them to stay where they are, but in fact, they have decided to come back."

I was confused, "So how is that not sensible? Surely that's what you've been arguing for ever since they went into hiding?"

Alwyn sighed. "I see I will have to explain in more detail. Please ask Demon to join us, as this involves her as much as you. And if you're lucky, I suspect she may bring you some sustenance to see you through what is likely to be a lengthy explanation."

I asked Alwyn to wait while I went and got my wife. Moving through to the kitchen I quickly explained who was on the viewscreen and Deborah's face lit up. She was very fond of Alwyn, considering him almost a surrogate father, although I have no idea why. Most of the time I think he and Ishtar are senile menaces to galactic peace. But I don't say that out loud any more, and especially not around the children. I learned that lesson the hard way a few years back.

I went back to my study and Deborah followed me soon after, with two large bowls of pasta. After an affectionate exchange of greetings between my wife and the Mage, we settled ourselves on the sofa in front of the viewscreen and Alwyn said, "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."

He first gave us a brief history of the Technomages, most of which I already knew. The Shadows created the Technomages' technology and originally had plans to turn them into warriors of chaos and destruction. This was first done to a race of similar age to the Minbari, called the Taratimude, who eventually became extinct, but not before rebelling against the Shadows and spreading the Technomage order to other races which included humans.

In 2259, sensing that the Shadows would soon come back out into the open, the Technomages had decided to leave known space for an unknown hiding place. They'd been there ever since. Alwyn was one of the few who'd refused to go into hiding. Galen had gone with them, but had been thrown out when he spent too much time interacting with humans and interfering in their affairs.

Alwyn went on, "Eleven years ago, the Technomages felt something they had never expected to feel again. They felt a wave of power the like of which had only ever come from their masters, the Shadows. Every Mage felt that power, felt the searching, yearning darkness that fueled it, but before they could lock onto it and track it to its source, it disappeared. I, of course, had an advantage. I recognized the source of the power immediately. I knew it was the merge and that it was now powered by Angel."

"When I arrived on Eriadne for Jack and Angel's wedding, I took the opportunity to speak to Angel about what had happened and to explain some things about her background to her. I told her I suspected that she was the product of a Vorlon experiment, when they had tried to subvert a line of breeding put in place by the Shadows. Where Demon's power was fueled by the Vorlon inside her, Angel's power comes from the Shadows. It is a dark and dangerous power. I planned to help her improve her control of herself and the merge before she accessed her powers again, but events overtook us. Galen arrived unexpectedly, and well... you know what happened then. When Angel attacked Galen she dug deep into the dark source of her powers and again, the Mages felt her. But again, they could not trace the power to its source before it ended."

"You have to understand how much the Technomage Circle wants to find that source. They believe that this new power can be used to create new Mages, and thereby perpetuate what has become a dying order. They no longer have the technology to produce a new generation, but they believe this new source of power could enable them to bypass the technology and breed a new type of Technomage, one independent of the implants we all carry. So they will do almost anything to find that power."

"I withheld my knowledge from the order, for fear of what might happen to Angel if they ever found her. When I took my family back to the hiding place in '84, I made a grave mistake. I did not appreciate the level of desperation the Circle had reached. They suspected I had knowledge of the source of the power they had felt four years before, and they held us against our will as they tried to persuade me to tell them what they so desperately needed to know."

"They coaxed and cajoled, bullied and badgered, threatened my family and my life but stopped short of breaking the ultimate Technomage vow, that we should never harm our own. Eventually, they realized that I would never disclose what I knew, and they released us after a period of ten months. And of course during my imprisonment, they felt that power again. When Angel led her sisters in the merge above Nabula, every Technomage in the galaxy felt her strength. Stronger than before; truly terrifying in its scale. They wanted that power more than ever."

Deborah and I had sat open mouthed with amazement at this sudden flood of information, and I could see the fear on my wife's face as she realized the danger to her sister. She surged to her feet and yelled at the screen, "You've known all this for seven years and you never told us? You've known that Angel was in danger, but you haven't asked us to protect her? How could you do this, Alwyn? We've trusted you!"

I don't think I've ever seen Deborah so angry and out of control. Alwyn was fortunate he wasn't in the room to feel the waves of fury she was projecting as she lost control of her feelings. I jumped up and pulled her into my arms, trying to distract her from her rage. "Deborah, stop! You're projecting and we're not in a shielded area. The baby..."

The door flew open and Marcus rushed in. "What the hell's going on, Mum? You're sending like nothing I've ever felt before and Jean-Luc is screaming his head off." We could hear the baby's cries in the background and that was all that was needed to help my wife get herself under control. She took a deep breath and her projections stopped dead. I don't think she'd sent such strong emotions since the Vorlon inside her had been killed, and I honestly hadn't thought she was capable of such force any more.

I held Deborah close to me as she got herself under control, then she took another deep breath and turned to Marcus. "I'm sorry, Marcus. It won't happen again. Can you go and calm Jean-Luc? We'll let you know what's going on later."

Marcus looked from his mother to me, then up at the screen. He raised his eyebrows when he saw Alwyn's image there, then looked back at his mother. I was sure he was linked to her and she must have said something to him through their link that made him back off. "OK, but I want to know what's happened here. Later."

He left and closed the door behind him, and I pulled Deborah down onto the sofa next to me, putting my arm around her. She held herself stiffly for a moment, resisting the pressure, then suddenly relaxed and allowed me to pull her against my side. I kissed the side of her head, then turned to the viewscreen.

"Alwyn, I assume you have a good reason for telling us all this now?"

Alwyn nodded. "I have been helping Angel quietly for the last eleven years. We have worked together on exercises that help her use her powers, but only lightly. Just touching the surface but never going too deeply into the heart of the darkness that fuels her. I have warned her against doing that, knowing that if she did, she would alert the Mages and they would try to find her. For eleven years, I have been successful at hiding her from them. For eleven years, I have continued to try and persuade my fellow Mages to give up their search. But I have failed in that objective."

"After seven years of deliberation, the Circle has finally reached a conclusion. They have decided to come out of hiding. The Technomages are returning to the galaxy. And I really do not know what they will do or with whom they will ally themselves. All I know is that Angel may be in danger from them. So I have come to you, Matthew, for your help, and the help of your Rangers. We need to protect Angel, because if the Mages were to capture and control her, not only would she be harmed, but the galaxy would never be the same."

I closed my eyes and sighed. As if I didn't have enough on my plate with alien invaders from a parallel universe and a rogue planet killing ship on the loose, now I had a few dozen Technomages planning to kidnap and use my sister-in-law to reestablish their order.

And the day had started off so well...

Alwyn

I waited for Matthew and Demon to digest everything I had told them, knowing that they would have questions, some of which I would answer and some of which I would not. I had held my temper during Demon's outburst as I knew that she felt betrayed and that her outrage sprang from her love for her sister. My fondness for the tall blonde made me more tolerant of her occasional presumption than I have ever been with her husband. But then Matthew often begs to have his ears tweaked. Or flamed.

I noticed that neither of them had eaten much of the food that Demon had brought in with her; not entirely surprising in the circumstances. I hoped they would find themselves with some appetite after our conversion was ended, but I doubted it. Nevertheless, it was important that they ate; they would need their strength over the coming weeks and months.

Matthew sprang to his feet and started to pace the room, a deplorable habit of his I had often noticed what he was agitated. After a few moments he stopped and glared at me. "How many Technomages are there now, Alwyn? And will they all be looking for Angel?"

They were both good questions. "There are only eighty seven of my order left alive now, Matthew, including myself. Of those, I believe I can persuade around thirty to support me. Unfortunately the remaining Mages are the more aggressive of our kind."

"So we'll have fifty plus aggressive Technomages running around, scouring the galaxy, trying to find the source of this dark power they sense, is that right?" Matthew was always good at arithmetic if not grammar.

"That is correct. But they will not be able to find Angel unless she uses her power. I will do everything I can to dissuade her from using her powers in any way for the foreseeable future, but that will only buy us time. It is not a permanent solution. One day she will inevitably do something that will reveal herself to the Mages searching for her. That is the day for which we must prepare."

Matthew started to pace again, and I could see his wife watching him anxiously. She would of course be feeling and sharing his emotions; as an empath she couldn't help herself.

"Alwyn, the timing of this couldn't be worse. We already have a major crisis on our hands with the destruction of Epsilon III and the opening of the rift in Sector 14. My White Stars are spread around the galaxy, hunting invaders that got through before we could stop them, and I've got the Excalibur guarding the opening, preventing anything else coming through. And we've also got a planet killing ship somewhere on the loose. The thought of trying to take on fifty plus rogue Technomages at the same time as all this...well, frankly it terrifies me!"

Matthew's admission made me smile. He had always been a man who was not afraid to acknowledge his fear and his weaknesses. It was that inherent honesty that had made him so valuable to me over the years.

"Matthew, you should not believe that any of this timing is coincidental. I am convinced it is not." That certainly got his attention. He spun on his heel and stared at me.

"What do you mean, Alwyn? How is this not a coincidence?"

I sighed and admitted, "I suspect that some of my order-and I don't know which, but I have my suspicions-have maintained contact with the Shadow subject races during their retreat into hiding. I also suspect that it was those same members of my order who advised the Drakh where they could obtain that 'planet killer ship' as you call it. The fact that this ship was first used on Epsilon III is also deeply suspicious. Draal and the Great Machine were allies of the Forces of Light in the last war. Their destruction and the opening of the rift have worked much to the advantage of the Forces of Darkness."

I paused and let some of my weariness and apprehension show. "Matthew, I believe this is the time of the gathering of darkness. Dark Technomages will join the Drakh and the invaders and they will attempt to visit chaos and destruction on us all. And they see Angel as a potential ally as well as a hope for the future. We must not let them get to her, Matthew. If she joined them, we could not hope to prevail."

Demon was on her feet immediately. "Angel would never join them! She wouldn't!"

I sighed, "Are you sure, Demon? Is there nothing they could offer her to persuade her? What if her son were to be given back to her? Would she refuse? Could she? We can't know for certain that she could resist that temptation."

I watched as Demon fell back onto the sofa, her face pale and drawn. I had no words of reassurance for her. "One thing is certain: Angel and her sisters must NOT initiate a merge. Now Ilas has gone-and I do miss that little shape-shifter-they do not have the strength to fight the forces of darkness, and a merge would immediately alert the Mages to Angel's location. I may have some ideas on how the loss of Ilas can be repaired, but that will take time. For now, whatever happens, however strong the temptation, whoever is in mortal danger, the sisters must not merge. Nightfall has come upon us. Darkness descends."

Matthew looked at me quizzically. "Those were Draal's last words. The last message from him said, 'The rift is open. Darkness descends.' I wasn't sure what those last two words meant."

I nodded. "Draal was a wise man, and the knowledge of the Great Machine was at his disposal. He recognized what was coming. He would have been a great asset in the war ahead, which was, of course, why the forces of darkness chose him as their first target. Did you not wonder why, having a planet killer at their disposal, your enemies chose to destroy Epsilon III first? It was to deprive you of a formidable ally, as well as to open the rift to potential new allies for the darkness."



I could not make my warning any clearer. As I went to end the call, Demon called out, "Alwyn, wait! I want to apologize for what I said earlier. I was unfair and unkind. I'm sorry."

I smiled at the tall blonde and said, "Forgiven of course, my dear. You love your sister and she loves you. That is probably the most powerful weapon we have on our side." I ended the call and went back to my meditations and calculations until Ishtar chirped a question at me.

"Yes, my love, I am sure Sarah and Jaysen are safe. They are hidden in a place they cannot leave until either I go to them or..." The alternative, of course, was my death. I had left my family with a ship that would only function if the bindings I had placed upon it were released by my death. I had faced death so many times in my long life that it no longer held any fears for me, but I would fight until my last breath not to leave my Sarah and our son.

"Come, Ishtar, we have work to do!"

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

{[Part 1: Serenity](#)} {[Part 2: Homecoming](#)} {[Part 3: A Winter's Tale](#)} {[Part 4: Darkness Descends](#)}