

The Witches of Eriadne: *Interlude Five B - Part 4: Darkness Descends*

by *The Space Witches*



The Excalibur

Chapter 2

15th June 2291

Matthew Gideon

It was another fine sunny Monday in the Ranger compound above Tuzanor, but there had been no roast beef lunch the previous day. For the last four weeks meals in our house had been cooked and eaten on the fly, in between viewscreen conferences, trips down to the Comms Room and trips up into orbit and beyond.



As I sat in my office mentally reviewing what progress we'd made during the previous weeks, I thought back longingly on those rare roast beef sandwiches with horseradish sauce and wondered when I might get to eat something that good again. Not for a while as far as I could see.

Alwyn's bombshell of a call and the information he'd divulged had sent ripples through our lives that were continuing to spread. In the immediate aftermath, the first thing Deborah did was to get onto the Comms Room and ask to be put through to the Excalibur and Serenity with top priority. After what Alwyn had told us, she wasn't even willing to use the

mental link with her sisters to talk to them. She asked me to sit in on the call, and requested that John, Luke and Jack accompany her sisters on their respective ships.

Once we were all convened, we told them all what Alwyn had told us. Everyone was clearly shocked by the news with one exception. Angel took it all calmly, then told us all we were over-reacting. I won't even attempt to describe how Deborah and Lily responded to that. It was a good thing that the three of them were physically separated, or I think Angel would have ended up with considerably less hair than she'd had at the start of the call.

*Other than the Technomages coming out of hiding, it was obvious that none of what Alwyn had told us was news to Angel. But it was also obvious that she hadn't shared Alwyn's warnings with anyone. Not even Jack, who was chewing his lip in a way I recognized. It was something I did when I was *really* pissed. I suspected that there were going to be words had in the Gideon-Denier family, and they weren't going to be pleasant ones.*

When we'd scraped my wife and Lily back down off the ceilings, we discussed the immediate implications of the news. In summary these were:

No mental linking between Angel and her sisters - viewcreens only until the crisis was resolved. That was the easy bit.

No use of Angel's powers for the same period. No telekinetic activity and definitely no teleportation - that didn't go down so well.

Angel said-with some logic as far as I could see-that the Technomages hadn't been able to find her for the eleven years since she first came to their notice, so why should she change her behavior now? This was one of those rare occasions when I felt Angel was being reasonable and Deborah irrational. But the position that Deborah and Lily took was that Angel couldn't afford to take any risks whatsoever, until the position with the Technomages was clarified.

Angel started to get stubborn and her sisters were beginning to climb the walls again, when Jack intervened. He'd calmed down a little and he was obviously much more accomplished in dealing with Angel's stubbornness that I'd ever been, as he just said quietly, "And what if you're wrong, Angelique? What if I were to lose you because of you taking a risk, no matter how small, that you didn't have to take?" Angel's resistance crumbled under the weight of Jack's sorrowful look.

That look was something I'd used on my wife on more than one occasion and it was somewhat bizarre to see it being used by my doppelganger. It seemed all the women in that family were suckers for a pair of sad brown eyes. Unfortunately, I noticed my wife was looking at me with a raised eyebrow. I think I'd just had one of my most useful ploys exposed.

Very grudgingly, Angel agreed to curtail the use of her powers until we knew where things stood with the Mages. We terminated the call at that point, not wishing to risk any further discussion that would lead to Angel changing her mind.

I then sent a message to Alwyn asking him to contact us again when he had more information about when the Technomages were likely to emerge from hiding and where they would go. Four weeks

later I was still waiting for a response to that one. No doubt he'll call when he's most needed and least wanted. Or is it the other way around?

The next few days had been busy as we'd kept track of where Braknar's thirteen hunting packs were, and what progress they were making. Two of the packs had been closing in on their prey, so I'd sent them some reinforcements.

The first new White Star off the production line was a prototype, so I'd held that one back at Minbar. But the next two I'd sent out to join the foremost of the hunting packs. They'd been fully field tested by their crews before release from the dockyards so there was no reason not to send them out into service at once. Well, immediately after the Minbari ceremony that had to be held before any new ship could be launched. The religious caste Minbari do love their ceremonies. But once that was over, we'd rolled them out quickly, which meant each of the packs that were drawing in on a command ship had a White Star with the equivalent of the Excalibur main gun.

It was a good thing I'd sent them, as it turned out they were needed.

Those invader command ships were tough bastards. Even ten White Stars all working together couldn't stop them completely. Damage them yes, slow them down yes, but stop them fighting? Not a chance. The only way to do that was to blow them out of the sky and the only thing that could do that was a high powered main gun.

After the first two packs had taken down their prey, I'd redistributed their ships to join other groups, and again, sent the upgraded White Stars to join the packs closest to their targets. As each new White Star was rolled out, they'd also been dispatched to join a hunting pack.

At the end of four weeks, my ships had destroyed eight of the original invaders, and I now had five hunting packs with twenty-five White Stars in each, in pursuit of the remaining five invaders, and each pack included two upgraded White Stars with main gun capabilities. The problem was that the trails were getting increasingly difficult to follow and we were falling further behind. I was beginning to think that those remaining five invaders might elude us completely. And I had to keep reminding myself that there may be more than five invaders left.

If more than one of those command ships had jumped through the same jump point, only one trail would be evident in hyper-space if they followed the same course. It was always possible that one of my hunting packs could come up against two or more invaders. There was just no way to tell, but we'd been lucky thus far. I could only hope our luck would hold.

We'd had the same problem with the traces left by the 'planet killer'. Andy Bentley's five ships had lost the trail in hyperspace, and I'd called them back in when it became apparent that there was no longer any point in them casting around for a scent that had gone cold. I'd sent them all to Earth to join the Earthforce fleet that was on guard around the planet. The three White Stars damaged in the original fight in Sector 14 had been returned to service and had been kept at Minbar to join the Minbari fleet. Centauri Prime, Narn and all other ISA members' home planets were similarly guarded by their home fleets as we had no idea where the planet killer might turn up next.

And all the time this was going on, the Excalibur had stayed in Sector 14, guarding the rift with a fleet of twenty-two White Stars. If you're keeping count of all these movements, I'd supplemented the

Sector 14 fleet with two White Stars released from hunting pack duties when their targets had been destroyed. Every single day they'd been there they'd been forced to fight off a new incursion. So far, nothing had escaped them. But they couldn't stay there forever. We needed a way to close that rift.

Tracking all these ship movements, keeping casualty lists, bringing injured Rangers back to Minbar for treatment, and sending fresh crew and supplies out to the packs was a logistical tour de force, which somehow Trulann and Deborah kept on track. The Comms Room was kept going by walking wounded, teachers and students who'd been hastily brought up to proficiency, to allow experienced Rangers to go out and join the ships spread out around the ISA territory. The only experienced Rangers of active service age I'd kept in the compound were Marcus Cole and Vya, and I had my own reasons for that, although I told them that I needed them to continue the teaching of the trainees we had in the compound at the time

*It had *not* been a fun four weeks. And the least fun parts were the visits to the Ranger hospital ship in orbit above Minbar. Deborah and I had gone up there on the first prototype new White Star, which I'd designated White Star Prime, and planned to use as my flagship if-or more likely when-I joined my Ranger forces. The new ship was beautiful, fast and powerful. We'd taken her on a quick jaunt, jumping in and out of hyperspace a couple of times, before bringing her back to dock with the hospital ship.*

My wife had joined me in a tour of that ship, visiting every Ranger on board, spending time with each and then discussing their cases with the doctors on board. There were forty-seven injured on the ship, roughly half wounded in the first battle at the rift, the rest in battles with command ships since then. Of those forty-seven, the doctors reckoned that twenty-five would soon be fit for light duties, and would be ready for reassignment to White Stars within another few weeks. The rest were either in for a long, slow recovery or would never again be fit for anything other than desk duties-if they survived. They would be offered roles in the Ranger compound or retirement if they preferred. Whichever way they decided, the Rangers would take care of them for the rest of their lives.

They had all made the Ranger vow which ends, "We live for the One, we die for the One." Well, as far as the current One was concerned, I'd much rather they lived, and I'd make damned sure they lived in comfort.

As I knew she would, Deborah struggled with the pain and emotions that pervaded the medical ship, but you would never have known it from her demeanor at the time. She smiled, talked quietly but encouragingly to every conscious patient, sat for a few moments holding the hands or equivalent appendages of the unconscious, sending waves of comfort and content everywhere she went. When we got back to our home I took her to our shielded bedroom and comforted her while she wept.

Then the next week we did that same thing again, as new casualties arrived, some of the wounded recovered, and a few died. And we did it again and again, and every time, Deborah held back her tears until we returned home. We stood side by side as the bodies of the lost Rangers were sent into space and blasted by a White Star's guns, scattering their atoms into the universe. The Minbari Grey Council may stand between the darkness and the light, but during those weeks we all seemed to be standing a lot closer to the darkness than usual.

But there were odd moments of light that brightened the all-encompassing gloom. Oddly, one came after one of my Shok'Nas in Sector 14 was injured during one of the many rift battles. He was

taken on board the Excalibur unconscious, and looked set to stay that way for several days at least. Luke Raven was positive about his eventual recovery, but advised that in the short term it would be best to let him recover from his head injury at his own rate.

The XO on that particular White Star was inexperienced, and I didn't have anyone back at base to send out to replace a Shok'Na at short notice. Having discussed the issue with the XO, she confirmed that she didn't feel ready to take on the full responsibilities of Captain if I had an alternative available, which I did. I called Jack Gideon and asked him if he would take command of White Star 54.

I think Jack moved so fast he may well have borrowed some of Angel's banned teleporting abilities. From then on, his White Star was in the thick of every battle, and he loved every minute of it. Finally, he was getting the chance of some revenge against the race that had hounded him for months, killing his crew and eventually damaging his ship so badly it self-destructed.

Angel had not been so pleased, as she'd proceeded to tell me in great detail and with impressive volume over the viewscreen in my office. I'm still not sure which had made her angrier; putting Jack in danger or removing him from her bed. I'd maintained total innocence on both charges. It's fortunate I've developed a very good poker face over the years, although Deborah wasn't fooled for a moment.

When the call with Angel was finally cut off, my wife had shaken her head and smiled at me, "That was very naughty, Matthew." I'd protested that I'd needed a good commander and Jack filled the job spec. Deborah had shaken her head again, "I know that, but I also know just how much you enjoy sending Jack away from Angel. But I'm going to forgive you anyway."

That had surprised me. I'd expected a much longer admonishment. Being the idiot I am, I'd had to push my luck. "Why?"

Deborah had flowed into my arms, lifted her mouth to be kissed and said softly, "Because you're giving Jack what he needs most right now. Whether Angel likes it or not, Jack needs to fight. He needs revenge of some kind for what was done to him and the people who were his family. This is the only chance he's likely to get. You know that, and you are a kind man, Matthew Gideon. You try to hide it, and with many people you succeed, but I know you too well. That's why I love you."

Which only goes to show that you *can* fool some of the people some of the time. Even an empath.

Angelique Gideon

Matt was very lucky that I was being good about not using my teleportation abilities when he offered Jack the job of Captain on White Star 54, because I was just about mad enough that I might have teleported myself all the way to Minbar and showed him *exactly* how I felt about that by inserting his Denn'bok where the sun don't shine! Not that I could really teleport that far...I don't think...

Never mind, the point is that I *was* being good, so I just called him and yelled at him for a while. Surprisingly, my sister let me. Demon made absolutely no attempt to intervene, so I guess she

thought he deserved it, too.

But deep down, I also knew that Jack needed to take the job that had been offered, as a way to finally get some pay back for what he'd suffered. So somehow I gritted my teeth, pushed all my fears for him aside, put my physical frustration on hold, insisted that he let me give him a haircut before he went off and kissed him goodbye with a smile on my face. Or the nearest I could get to a smile at that point anyway. It may have looked more like a grimace...

The good thing about the new set up was that I was now Captain of Serenity. Yes, you heard me! I'd passed all the necessary exams to qualify for my Captain's ticket a couple of years earlier, but the need had never arisen before. But with Jack away, I was the only person he trusted with our beloved home. And even then I knew deep down that he only trusted me because we were docked to the Excalibur, with the most powerful ship in the ISA and twenty-two White Stars between us and the bad guys.



That just goes to show that Jack doesn't know me as well as he thinks! I made damned sure that I stayed on the bridge of Serenity as much as possible, and when I did go to rest, the crew knew to wake me in the event of any battles starting. As there were invaders coming through every day, with no discernible pattern to their arrival, this led to a rather disturbed sleeping pattern, but I didn't see why I should sleep regularly if Jack, his crew and the crews of every other ISA ship in the sector didn't have that benefit. And spending less time in my cabin alone gave me less time to brood on my past mistakes.

So every time a group of invaders came through I put the crew on high alert, raced to the bridge and watched the battle carefully. Jack had been gone for a week when I finally got my chance. Eight command ships and fifty plus smaller vessels had come through the rift at once. The White Stars were hunting down the smaller ships while the Excalibur dealt with the command ships, shooting them down one by one with her main gun. The problem was that while she was shooting each one down, the others were closing in on her.

From my vantage point tucked under the cowl that ran the length of the ship, and between two of the giant fins, I saw one command ship and ten of the smaller vessels start an attack run from the

rear of the Excalibur. They came in under her tail and out of range of her rear guns, which couldn't depress far enough to follow them under her belly. All the Excalibur's Starfuries were engaged in battle elsewhere, and I knew that the invaders could do a lot of damage to the Excalibur before they came out from under her to be exposed to her side and front guns.

They didn't know Serenity was waiting for them.

I gave the order to open fire with every gun we had as they flew underneath us, catching them completely by surprise. We took out eight of the smaller craft and even managed to send the command ship spinning sideways, right into the path of the Excalibur's guns. That gave the Excalibur just enough time to orientate herself and bring the main gun to bear on the command ship. They blew it out of the sky. The final two smaller vessels were taken out by Excalibur's other guns.

I sat back in the Captain's chair with a huge grin of satisfaction on my face. Jack wasn't the only one who wanted to blow up some bad guys!

My comms operator turned round to look at me with a grin on his face. "Message from the Excalibur, Captain. Captain Matheson sends his thanks but asks if you could let him know if you plan to do that again. He says we startled him so much he nearly fell out of his seat. He says fortunately they have seatbelts these days. He also says-and he asked me to pass this on verbatim, 'Don't push your luck, Angel. Lie low and keep your head down now, please.' End of message."

I grinned back at Clayton, and winked, "Please send back the following message, Frank. Tell Captain Matheson that he is very welcome, but I may be asking a favor in return in the near future." I paused and waited for a response.

Clayton came back, "Captain Matheson says he owes you and he'll pay his debt, but to please remember to keep your head down."

I smiled and said, "I don't think we need to respond to that, do you, Frank? We can't break promises we don't make."

That got a cheer from my bridge crew, but before we could take any further part in the battle, it was over. I was feeling incredibly pleased with myself, when Clayton turned to me, his face much more sober as he said, "Captain Gideon would like a word and he's asked me to ask you to take his call in your quarters."

I raised an eyebrow and said, "By all means, put him through there. I'm on my way down. Please take over, Frank." I knew Jack was calling to give me a severe talking to, but I had plans on how to deal with that. Sneaky plans. I'd known this moment would come and I was well prepared.

In the week that Jack had been away, Lily had visited me on Serenity a couple of times. I hadn't been willing to leave Serenity while Jack was away, so my sister had made her way through the docking tube to my ship. The first time, she'd made the mistake of wearing one of her usual long, flowing dresses. Watching her trying to control all the fabric in the weightless environment of the docking tube had made me laugh so much I was completely helpless by the time she arrived in the cargo bay. Every time I managed to stop laughing I'd just look at her face and her dress and off I'd go again.

Eventually Lily got so cross with me she actually stamped her foot with temper, and that just set me off again. She was about to flounce out and go back to the Excalibur when I'd finally pulled myself together long enough to apologize and beg her to stay. I'd also offered to lend her a pair of pants, or at least a less voluminous skirt for her transfer back. My clothes would be a little big on her, but anything would have to be better than the dress she'd arrived in.

We eventually settled in my quarters for a good long chat and catch up during which Lily reminded me of something I had long forgotten, something that I now planned to use to my advantage with Jack. And yes, the next time Lily visited, she'd worn pants. I hadn't known she possessed a pair!

So when Jack called and started to berate me, I just kept smiling sweetly at him, let him rant and rave about my recklessness and said nothing. He eventually ran out of steam and started to peer through the screen at me suspiciously. "So why aren't you saying anything? How am I getting away with this?" OK, so maybe he does know me quite well.

I smiled and said, "Because I want to explain my rationale to you in person. Would you be OK if I left Frank Clayton in command over here and can you find a reason to meet me on the Excalibur?"

I knew I'd piqued Jack's curiosity when he said, "I'd planned to see Captain Matheson soon anyway, so I guess I could get together with you after the meeting. But if the rift opens and anything comes through, I'll have to get back over to 54 pronto."

I nodded quietly, "I understand. But I really would like to see you for a little while; I've missed you, Jack."

My husband really ought to know by now that he should watch out when I'm being meek. I made a quick call to Lily and asked for my favor, which she quickly agreed to pass onto John. Then I changed into a pair of skintight black leather pants and a tight red top.

I met Jack an hour later by the airlock in the Excalibur, and I have to admit that it was a very satisfactory and thorough reunion. Well, as satisfactory as it could be when we had to keep our clothes on and with other people walking past us every two seconds. But I had plans to change both of those things.

Before he could start questioning me, I took Jack's hand and led him to one of the access shafts for the bullet car tubes. When he saw me opening the shaft cover he looked at me in puzzlement. "Just where are you planning on going, Angelique? We need to talk."

"And we will, but I want that discussion to take place in private," I said, then told him to follow me and started climbing the access shaft ladder, giving my rear end a quick wiggle to encourage his obedience. Jack started climbing behind me, muttering about me having gone completely mad while he was away.

When we reached the top of the shaft, I stepped out onto the ledge that ran the length of the bullet car tubes, and waited while a car went past, creating a sudden rush of wind. I watched as Jack closed his eyes and lifted his face to the breeze. He smiled and said, "I remember when I first found out about the breeze that blows through these tubes. I love the feel of wind on my face. How did you know that?"

I smiled back and said nothing, just holding out my hand to take his and gently pulling him along with me. Jack followed silently, until we walked around one of the tube supports, and he saw what stood in front of us. Then he started to laugh.

"What idiot decided a bullet car tube would be a good place to store a motorbike?"

It was a big, red, shiny motorbike. It had once been black, but after a little magic of mine, it was now a nice bright red. I like red. Particularly for things that go very fast, like motorbikes and Ferraris.

I explained how the bike had been a Christmas present from Matt to Demon many years before and how they had left it behind for John, Lily and Luke to use when they left the Excalibur, as the only way to get it out would have been to disassemble it. "John's kept it in perfect condition over the years, so it's still rideable. Want to go for a ride?" I placed my hands on my husband's chest and looked up at him, licking my lips in anticipation. I had more than one ride in mind at that point.



Jack looked behind me down the length of the tube. "But what about the bullet cars? We can't ride the bike while they're running."

"This section is being taken out of service for the next hour. A small favor from Captain Matheson."

Jack started to grin, looking at the bike then looking at me, his eyes roving from my feet to my face and back down again, lingering on my

breasts.

"So we have an hour. Exactly what sort of ride did you have in mind, Angelique?"

My answering smile was full of pure lust as I said, "Every sort that you can think of, and then some."

It wasn't long before I was naked, spread across the bike with my husband riding me hard. Then we took the motorbike for a ride, both of us still naked and screaming our heads off as we flew down the tube. Then we sped back to where we started and this time I rode Jack.

Somehow Jack forgot all about telling me off, but before we left the tube, he bent me over the bike and gave me a thorough spanking. Not that I was complaining.

22nd June 2291

John Matheson

It had been five long, exhausting weeks since we'd started playing cat in front of the mouse-hole, and my crew and the crews of the twenty-two White Stars that watched with us were getting weary and frayed around the edges. Five weeks is a long time to stay on full battle alert. Crews were only off duty long enough to eat and sleep then they went back to their posts. And even sleep was disrupted as there seemed no way to predict when the next attack might occur.

Nureel and I took turns in command, but we also overlapped for eight hours of every ship's day. When I was off duty, I would stumble back to my quarters and fall into bed, often too tired to eat. Then Lily would wake me up in time to go back on duty, and she would force-feed me something before I left. I honestly have no memory of anything I ate during that period. I think I caught a glimpse of my other partner, Luke, on maybe two or three occasions during those five weeks, as he was spending just as many hours in Medbay as I was on the bridge.

The casualties rolled in after every battle, fortunately none too serious (apart from our sleeping not-so-beauty of a White Star Shok'Na. After a while the Medbay crew started to make jokes about how they'd like to swap places with him) but they came in a steady flow, keeping Luke and his team fully stretched. The White Stars' crews also suffered injuries, but most could be treated on board their own ships. The few more serious injuries came over to the Excalibur, while the really seriously injured were shipped back to Minbar.

The problem was that as time went on, the injury count was climbing and I knew that many mistakes were now occurring because of fatigue and lapses in concentration.

My daily conferences with the Entil'Zha were getting shorter and sharper, as I kept asking what progress was being made on a permanent solution to closing the rift, and Matthew kept saying they were working on it. I could hear myself becoming almost shrill as I demanded that they work on it faster!

The only light relief came when supply ships arrived, bringing a much greater variety of foodstuffs than we usually stocked. I think Demon must have been stripping every merchant ship that came anywhere near Minbar at that time to supply every species on board the Excalibur and the White Stars with their favorite source of nutrition. When a large supply of Breen arrived, we nearly had a stampede in the Mess hall.

Actually, that wasn't the only moment of light-heartedness during that period. Another came-and I use that word advisedly-when Lily passed on Angel's request that I should shut down a section of the bullet car tubes for an hour. I knew exactly what she was up to, but managed to keep a straight face during my meeting with Jack Gideon, before he left to join her. I knew he was in for the ride of his life, but I didn't want to spoil his fun.

But other than food, sex and sleep-all pretty basic needs, and I wasn't getting much of two of them and none at all of the third-we didn't have much respite during those grueling five weeks. Another Monday rolled around, another battle with another command ship and nine smaller vessels coming through the rift, and another conference with Entil'Zha Gideon.

I was accompanied at my end by five of the White Stars' Captains, including Jack, and we were all just about ready to lynch Matthew when he came on screen. But before we could start in on him, he held his hand up and said, "Just let me get a couple of things straight before we start. First, one of

my hunting packs has caught another command ship. That means I have twenty-five White Stars free, two of which are the new upgraded versions with the extra powerful main gun. Like you, they've been out for a long time, but unlike you, they've only had to fight one or two battles, and they were over pretty quickly. So I'm sending all twenty-five ships to relieve the White Star fleet currently in Sector 14 and the twenty-two ships there at present will all be recalled to Minbar for R&R as soon as the replacements arrive, which should be tomorrow."

There was a cheer and a babble of conversation from four of the five Captains sitting around the conference table. Jack looked less happy as he knew that meant his stint as a White Star Shok'Na was coming to an end. I could sense his disappointment from where I sat opposite him, without having to use any telepathic powers. And that was all very well for the White Stars, but what about the Excalibur? When did we get a break from the unremitting pressure?

Before I could put my question, Matthew continued, "Jack, I just wanted to thank you for standing in as you've done over the last couple of weeks. I appreciate how much of your time this is taking up, but if you and Angel are willing to stick with the Excalibur for a while longer, I'd feel a lot more comfortable knowing you were both nearby."

Matthew obviously didn't want to refer to the Technomage threat to Angel in front of a wider audience, but Jack and I both knew what he was talking about.

Jack nodded slowly, "It's been my pleasure, Matt, but you need to know, these last few weeks have put a hell of a strain on everyone at this end."

He leaned forward and grimaced at his double as he said, "Just how much longer does the Excalibur have to wait here? What are those brains back on Minbar doing with themselves? We need a permanent solution, Matt. I've lost track of how many of these damned ships we've destroyed so far, but I know from personal experience that there are thousands of them on the other side of that rift, and we've been damned lucky that they've been coming through in small groups. One of these days we're going to have fifty or a hundred command ships coming through together, and even the Excalibur won't be able to stand up to them. We have to close the rift."



He was banging his fist on the table as he ended his last sentence, emphasizing the urgency and difficulty of our position.

Matthew nodded, "I know, Jack, and I know how valuable your experience with these invaders has been to John and to all the White Stars in Sector 14."

There was a murmur of agreement from around the table, but Matthew cut across it to say, "We have some progress on the rift closing front, too. The dockyard is just finishing off the construction of a special ship, which we'll then have towed by a couple of White Stars to your station. This ship is jammed packed full of engines, nothing else, just massive power sources. The scientists tell me that

if we push this ship into the rift, wind the engines up to push out a massive tachyon pulse, then blow it up right in the heart of the rift, that should close the hole between the universes."

He smiled and shook his head as he went on, "Don't ask me how it's going to work, as I haven't the faintest idea, but they assure me that the explosion will close the rift, rather than blowing it up even larger. I'm going to use White Star Prime as the main towing ship, so I'll join you for the fireworks display. The ship-I've named it Big Bang-will take four more days to complete, then it will take us another two days to tow her out to your position. So if you can hang on for another week, we'll get this over with. In the meantime, the replacement White Stars will be with you tomorrow. And as I said, two of them have the equivalent of the Excalibur main gun, but like the old days, they only have one shot before they need to recharge. But they should be able to take some of the pressure off the Excalibur in fighting the command ships."

A sense of relief washed over me. At last the end was in sight. I could tell my crew that we only had to get through another week on battle alert status and then we could stand down. I looked up at the screen and said, "Thank you for that news, Entil'Zha. But can you also confirm that the Excalibur will get some time for R&R at the end of this? My crew needs a break before we tackle any other assignments you might have."

Matthew smiled again. "I'll do my best, John. But if that planet killer appears again, then I'm afraid all bets are off."

I nodded. "Understood."

At that moment, klaxons sounded and the loudspeaker started blaring, "Invaders incoming, all personnel to battle stations, invaders incoming."

I nodded a farewell at the screen, pushed myself wearily to my feet and said to my colleagues, "Better get back to your ships, ladies and gentlemen. We have more battles to fight before we can finally stand down." Then I trotted through to the bridge to join Nureel in combat with yet another group of invaders.

26th June 2291

Matthew Gideon

When Deborah and I boarded White Star Prime it felt like a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders. At last I was doing something concrete, going somewhere, achieving something. After all those weeks of sitting on my ass-OK sometimes I was standing at the map table-sending everyone else off to do things, at last I could do something myself. And yes, I know that sitting in the center, planning what needs to be done, by whom and when is important work, but it just felt good to finally be going somewhere.

I'd felt less good the previous day when the twenty-two White Stars that had been with the Excalibur on rift duty had arrived back on Minbar. I'd waited at the Ranger landing strip as they'd come in one by one, landing and disembarking their crew. Although all White Stars are built from Vorlon designed plasteel that has the ability to 'heal' damage to the hull, somehow all the ships

looked tired and worn around the edges, as did their crews. I'd made sure I'd met and spoken to every one of them as they came ashore and thanked them for their efforts.

The Minbari Rangers quickly dispersed to their homes and families, while other species mostly stayed in the Ranger compound. We have some decent recreation facilities but most of them just wanted to sleep, eat and relax. By the end of the day we had a lot of Rangers sitting quietly in the sun in small groups having quiet conversations. Others sat alone, reading or sometimes just sitting, soaking up the peace and quiet. After over five weeks living cheek by jowl with their colleagues, I think a lot of them just enjoyed the sense of solitude that the Ranger compound can give.

By the time Big Bang was ready to depart, I was ready, too. I'd made sure that the Minbari kept the inevitable religious ceremony before the new ship was launched to a minimum, then delegated day to day running of the compound to Marcus Cole and Vya. I took Trulann with me as my XO on White Star Prime.

Sech Rastenn was still in overall charge of all the Ranger trainees, but Marcus and Vya were taking over the running of the Comms room from Trulann and Deborah, bringing in any data we could pick up from our sources around the ISA that might give us a clue to our enemies' activities, as well as organizing the movements of supplies and tracking the four remaining hunting packs. They'd be providing me with regular updates and reports while I was away.

I have to say that the thought of a two-day cruise to Sector 14, with my wife by my side, was incredibly appealing. We'd left our son, Marcus, at home to help with looking after his son, Jean-Luc, in whatever time he got off from training. That would teach him to take more care before he went out scattering his seed again. There's nothing quite like a really stinky diaper for reminding you to keep your contraceptive shots up to date. I'd learned that lesson myself years before, although I'd been rather older than Marcus at the time.

One thing I'd made sure of before Deborah and I had boarded our ship was that our quarters were fully shielded against telepathic scans incoming or outgoing. I planned to spend a fair amount of time in those quarters during the two-day journey to Sector 14, and I didn't plan to be alone.

Deborah and I had tried to make time to spend with each other every day, but I have to admit that sometimes sleep had been more appealing than sex. And that's something I'm sure you never thought you'd hear me say! Maybe the years were catching up with us after all. Then again, we planned to spend the two days on board Prime having sex like bunnies on aphrodisiacs, so maybe not.

I settled in my chair in the center of the bridge, with Deborah standing behind me, and gave the command that would take us up into orbit, where we were rendezvousing with Big Bang and the other ship that would be helping with the tow. This was one of the White Stars-designated 93-that had returned to Minbar, damaged, after the first battle of the rift, but was now operational once more.

Towing another ship through hyperspace was a delicate process, and not something that was often done. But in this case it was essential. While Big Bang had more engines per cubic meter than had ever been built into any other ship, she had virtually no control systems. She had no crew or space for them. She was built to be operated remotely from a White Star, and Prime would be handling her, with 93 as back up in the event of an emergency. So one of the positions on my bridge was

entirely devoted to controlling Big Bang, and I had three of my most experienced and skilled Ranger pilots on board, taking shifts in operating that station.

After a quick check that all stations were fully functional, I gave the command to take us out of orbit and far enough away from Minbar's space traffic lanes to safely open a jump-point. This was the moment of truth. Could the pilot handling Big Bang keep her close enough to bring her through the jump-point that Prime opened?

As the red vortex of the outgoing jump-point opened up in front of us, I kept a side viewscreen trained on Big Bang and watched her slide right up alongside us, almost close enough to touch. Her hull can only have been a couple of meters away from Prime's wingtip and I held my breath as we surged through the jump-point into the churning red of hyperspace beyond, with Big Bang matching our every move.

White Star 93 followed us a few seconds later, then we locked onto the nearest beacon and started navigating our way, following the tachyon beam that led us to the next beacon. Once my tiny fleet was on its way I thanked the bridge crew for a job well done, told Trulann he had command, then turned and held my hand out to my wife. She smiled, took my hand and walked with me to our quarters.

We didn't come out again until I was due back on the bridge twelve hours later, and I can assure you that we didn't just sleep away those hours. Although I have to admit that the first thing we did when we got to our cabin was to fall into bed and sleep for eight hours straight. But once we woke up we made up for lost time. We were both limping slightly as we made our way back to the bridge to resume our duties.

The two-day journey to Sector 14 was uneventful, which is the best thing that any trip through hyperspace can be. At least this time no oversexed life-forms tried to ravish my virgin ship. But a fair amount of ravishing went on in my quarters when I was off duty. A thorough ravishing can be very good for my morale, whether I'm giving or receiving.

I was therefore feeling cheerful if a little sore as we approached the final beacon for Sector 14. The reports coming in from Minbar contained nothing of major concern, although we were getting accounts of raids on small, outlying settlements that were disturbing. Nothing we could pin down, nothing focused in any particular region of space, or in any ISA member's territory, but overall, there was a definite increase in reports of attacks and in some cases the complete destruction of small colonies.

Marcus Cole had sent out several of the White Stars that had remained with the ISA member fleets to investigate, and he was awaiting their updates. It was something we'd need to look into more closely when we got the time and the resources. Both of those would become available if the mission I was now overseeing was successful.

The jump back into normal space went as smoothly as our first jump had, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw the stars surround us once more, with Big Bang following alongside us like a baby whale swimming next to its mother.

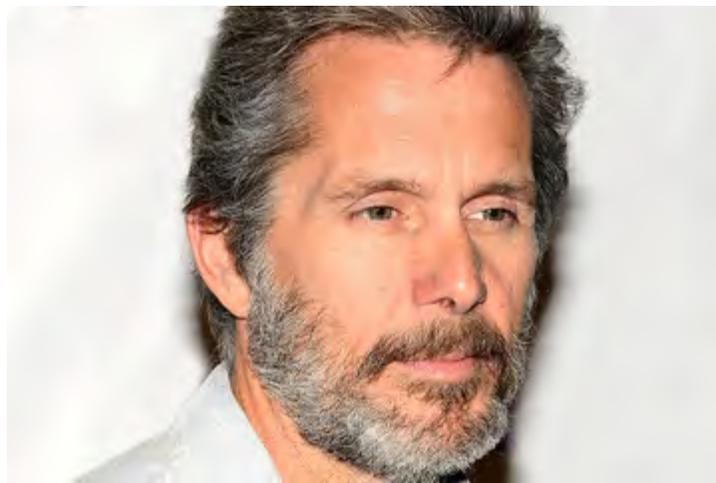
"Contact the Excalibur and get co-ordinates for a rendezvous." I gave the command to the comms station, then turned my attention to the viewscreen. I winced as I realized we'd arrived in the midst of yet another battle.

The Excalibur was firing shot after shot from her main gun, taking out an invader command ship with every shot, but they still swarmed around her. My White Stars were split between those pursuing and attacking smaller vessels and those trying to help the Excalibur and her Starfuries. I ground my teeth at my inability to join in the fight, but with Big Bang tethered to us, I couldn't afford to make the sudden movements and changes of direction that a battle would call for. And we certainly couldn't afford any damage to Big Bang.

I felt Deborah's hand on my shoulder and then the wash of calm confidence that she projected.

"Comms, tell 93 to go and shoot something. Gunners stand-by and if anything comes our way, fire at it." I wasn't going to sit out the fight completely, not if an enemy ship was stupid enough to get within firing range of my guns.

It was excruciating to watch my ships being battered and shot up by the enemy without being able to do much to help, but I had no choice. I'm surprised I hadn't ground my teeth down to the gums by the time the battle came to an end. A couple of the smaller invaders had come our way, and we'd had no trouble dispatching them but it had nearly broken my heart to watch the Excalibur take such a beating. No wonder John had been getting increasingly demanding about the need for a permanent solution. No commander willingly accepts that sort of punishment being done to his ship daily, nor the impact that damage has on his or her crew.



When the battle was finally over my comms operator spoke quietly, "Excalibur apologizes for the delay in replying, but says things got a little busy there for a while. I have the co-ordinates, and Captain Matheson says he'd be happy if you and Mrs. Gideon would join him on board the Excalibur as soon as you can shuttle across."

I nodded to acknowledge the message and said, "Thank Captain

Matheson for his invitation and tell him we're on our way. Trulann, you have command."

Deborah and I made our way to Prime's small shuttle bay. She had just the one shuttle and it was only a three man ship, but that was all that was needed. I piloted us across to the Excalibur and into her huge landing bay. It had been quite a while since I'd been on board and I winced again as I saw the internal damage that my old ship had suffered. I could feel the guilt building inside me until Deborah gently touched my hand as it rested on the shuttle controls. The wave of love and confidence she sent made me smile. I turned to her and said softly, "Thanks, but I still hate to see all this." I waved at the dents, scrapes, burned spots and hanging cables that indicated where the Excalibur had suffered.

My wife smiled sadly, "I know, so do I, but this is not your fault. We didn't ask these invaders to come through and if they'd come across peacefully, we would have welcomed them. Make sure you lay the blame where it belongs and don't try to carry that burden yourself."

Wise words but hard advice to follow.

I received instructions for where to park the shuttle, and proceeded to that part of the bay, then set down and turned off our engines. As I slid out of the pilot's seat, I turned to Deborah and said, "Let's go see your sisters. Just make sure you don't all touch at once." The last thing we needed was an accidental merge taking place, even an incomplete one.

By the time we stepped out onto the shuttle ramp, a small crowd had gathered at the foot. John, Luke, Lily, Jack and Angel had all come to meet us. It was good to meet my extended family again and for a little while there was a lot of hugging and back-slapping. I enjoyed the former more than the latter, especially where Angel and Lily were concerned. So I like hugging beautiful women, OK?

The next few hours were spent in briefings about the battle that had just ended with damage and casualty reports, and about how Big Bang would be deployed to close the rift.

I was a little more up on the technical details than I had been six days earlier when I'd first told John and Jack about the new ship. So now the three of us sat in the Excalibur's conference room, with the viewscreen showing all the other Shok'Nas who were linking into the call. Twenty-six Captains of White Stars, and Trulann from Prime all needed to be briefed, particularly the two Shok'Nas who were in command of the new upgraded White Stars that had an important role to play in what was to come.

"White Star Prime will drive Big Bang into the center of the rift, then we'll back off to a safe distance. We can run her remotely from anything up to ten thousand kilometers away, which should give us plenty of margin. From our position, we'll start up her engines, building the power until she's running at full throttle. She'll start emitting tachyon pulses into the rift, spreading a tachyon field across the gap. Don't ask me how the next bit works, but apparently the tachyons will latch onto the edges of the rift until the field fills the gap. Then it gets tricky." I leaned forward in my seat and spoke slowly and carefully, making sure I had all the details correct.

"We need to position the Excalibur, Prime and the two upgraded White Stars at four equidistant points from Big Bang. Then we all fire our main guns simultaneously. This has to be timed precisely and we have to hit our exact targets to achieve the required effect. If we get it wrong, there'll just be a hell of a big explosion, but the rift will still be there. If we get it right, instead of an explosion, Big Bang will implode. It will collapse in on itself, dragging the tachyon field and the edges of the rift back in with it. And incidentally, it will also drag in any other matter within a thousand or so kilometers, so we'll need to make sure that everyone is well away from this. The ship will keep imploding until it forms a singularity, a tiny black hole, which will have the edges of the rift wrapped tightly around it. Anything that tries to go through that rift from either direction will butt its nose straight into a black hole, which is not a healthy thing to do. It would get dragged into the singularity, just making it bigger."

I could see a wave of concern spreading around my audience, and Jack voiced what I'm sure many of the others were thinking. "Creating a black hole, even a small one, is a hell of a hazard to

navigation, Matt."

I nodded. "I know, and anywhere else, we'd try to find another solution, but here in Sector 14, there's not much traffic anyway as ships tend to avoid it. And we'll place beacons all around the area to warn off any ships that do drop into this system. What the invaders do on their side of the rift is their problem. If a few of them get sucked in, I won't be losing any sleep."

That provoked a wave of laughter from the group. "Does anyone have any questions? Because if not, the sooner we get this done the better. I'd like to close that gap before another group of those bastards try to come through." That generated a chorus of assent and the conference broke up.

I stood and said to John and Jack, "I'll get back over to Prime to oversee things from there. Deborah's stopping here with Angel and Lily for a while." I turned to Jack, "Do you want to come over with me and see the job done from up close?" Stupid question.

Jack and I shuttled back to Prime and watched as the scientists and pilots took over. We maneuvered Big Bang into place, set her engines running, then backed off as far as our remote control system would allow. The navigation officers of the Excalibur and the other two upgraded White Stars were given their firing co-ordinates and all the ships moved into position. I found my mouth had gone dry and I had to lick my lips to give the command. "Fire on my mark...Mark."

Four beams of white destruction lashed out and hit four cardinal points around Big Bang. There was a huge flash of white light, then it was like watching an explosion running backwards. The white light was sucked inwards, getting smaller and smaller, until it winked out of existence. I turned to my science station and asked, "Did it work?"

There was a small pause and then the Minbari in charge of that station looked up and nodded. "The rift has closed. There is now a singularity in its place."

I swear you could hear the cheer that went up from the crews of the twenty-eight ships in that sector right across the vacuum of space.

28th June 2291

Connor Black

So who is Connor Black, I hear you asking yourself? Well, that's me. Or it's me now. I haven't always gone by this name, just for the last twelve years. I came to this planet back then, with a child, an idiot and a dog. The idiot ran away after a few months and took the dog with him; I was glad to see the back of them both. The child...well, I took care of the child a little later and I've lived here alone most of the time since then, apart from my faithful housekeeper, Anna.

'Here' is the Draxis colony, originally a Drazi settlement on the border between the Drazi Freehold and the Centauri Republic, which got obliterated during the Centauri war back in '62. It didn't take long for humans to move in on the abandoned mines and farms, as the climate was more suitable for humans anyway. Too cool and damp for the Drazi-they like it hot and dry as Hell and most of them look like they'd fit in real well there-but perfect for someone like me who grew up in South Carolina back when we thought that old Earth was the only inhabited planet in the galaxy.

I set up home on Draxis back in '79 but I'd had the house here for a while before that, and I'd bought my way into the mines. Once I moved in permanently, it hadn't taken many 'accidents' before I controlled everything going in and out of the colony; animal, vegetable and mineral. The locals thought I'd moved there after losing my wife in childbirth, but it was a long prepared bolt-hole, ready and waiting just in case Angel called me on the promise I'd made her.

Angel-Angelique Denier-was the woman I just didn't seem able to forget. The only woman I've ever lo...lived with. The mother of my child.

I'm not gonna bore you with a long history of my life on Earth back in the late 20th century, the 250 years plus I spent imprisoned in an Apocalypse Box, my release and life on Babylon 5 with Angel or the time I spent rebuilding after I lost her and everything else I owned. The only thing you need to know is that Angel was one of only two women in the galaxy who could give me the heir that I needed. The heir to the thing I've carried inside me all my adult life: the Rage.

The Rage gives me power and abilities that other don't have, and one of these days it'll kill me, but not until it has another body to move to. A body from my bloodline with a mind strong enough to hold it and to use it; a body and mind that's been well prepared to accept it, just as my daddy prepared me. The preparation wasn't much fun, and my heir wouldn't much enjoy his training either; but it was necessary.

My heir needed strength that had to come from the mother as well as the father, and when I got out of the Box, I found two women with the right potential. They were both 'witches' but they didn't understand the source of their powers. I knew from the start what gave them their strength; the strength they needed to be the mothers of my heirs.

I saw the Vorlon inside Demon, the older sister, from the start, and I knew that any child of hers would inherit some of that alien's power. So I knocked her up before I was put back in the Box and left her to carry my heir to term. Before then, Demon's younger sister, Angel, released me again and I stole her away, knowing that I could block her abilities. She was clueless as to the source of her power but I knew. I could feel the darkness in her, see the shadow that drove her from within, but she was too young then and hadn't reached her full potential.

I first tried to take Demon's son from her at birth, but I failed, betrayed by Angel. I wanted to kill Angel for that betrayal, but I needed her to produce a spare to my heir. I tried again when the boy was seven years old, but I'd left it too late. The brat had been raised with love and kindness and he was ruined for my purposes. That's when I learned that Demon had been physically damaged and could no longer provide me with the heir I needed.

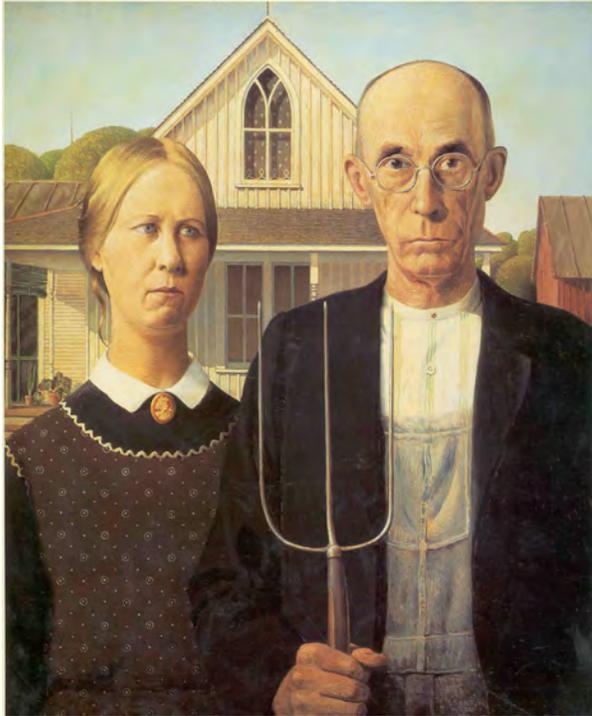
So I turned my attention to Angel and I offered her a deal. I told her if she gave me the child I needed, I wouldn't take Demon's son away from his mother. She didn't know the boy was useless to me, so I gave Angel a choice that was no choice-the illusion of free will. Of course, Angel chose to sacrifice herself for her sister, and she came with me. But I promised her I'd let her go after the child was born, if she chose to leave. I was sure she'd never leave me, given the choice...there's that word again...

Angel bore my child on Regula IV and then she left. The thought of her leaving still makes me boil with rage. She shouldn't have made that choice, shouldn't have been able to make that choice or

have been willing to leave her baby, but I'm a man of my word, so I let her go. Good riddance to her. I packed my bags and moved to Draxis, bringing the baby with me.

I'd planned to raise my son here with the help of a nanny/housekeeper, but it was soon obvious that wouldn't work. Anna became attached to the brat; started loving it, cuddling it and being kind to it. That's not the way the men in my family are brought up to take their inheritance. We need to grow up angry; angry enough to carry the Rage.

So I took the child away, back to Earth, back to the place where I'd grown up and lived my first life. Back to Trinity, where those who were loyal to me had prospered and the disloyal had...accidents. I



found a couple on a farm well out of town, an older pair, rigid and grim. They looked just like the couple in that picture called 'American Gothic'. They were religious nuts who believed there was no joy in this life and that the afterlife was earned through hard work and privation.

Idiots. I know all about the afterlife. You'd better enjoy this life while you can, although Hell ain't half as bad as it's made out to be.

I gave the child to those people and told them to care for his physical needs, to feed him well and make him strong, but to train him to hard work, and if he needed a good thrashing, then to beat him. I told them his name was Gabriel, the name his mother had given him, then I left him.

Back in Trinity I set up some local contacts to keep an eye on the boy and report back to me on his progress. The local sheriff, the schoolteacher and the doctor all became my agents, and that's how things stood for over nine years.

I settled back on Draxis, telling the people there that my son had been lost on Earth, but that I was looking for him and one day I'd catch up with his kidnappers and make them pay. It was a good story for a couple of middle-aged widows-newly widowed after their husbands had been killed in 'accidents' in the mines-who I was courting at the time. I kept servicing them until they'd changed their wills and left me their shares in the mines, then they both caught a mysterious sickness and died within days of each other. It was truly tragic.

Getting hold of the farmland was easy. I set up a bank, loaned the farmers money for seeds and equipment, then made sure that poor harvests meant they couldn't pay me back. They signed their land over to me to pay their debts, and I generously allowed them and their families to stay on their farms, working as my tenants. Anyone worried about how much I owned and how I did business didn't last long. Loyalty counts, and it's healthier to stay loyal to me.

I brought in more miners to increase production in the mines; not the family men who'd worked there before, but hard bastards who just wanted to make a quick buck. I paid them well, then took it all back from them in the whorehouse I set up to entertain them. Between the backwoods nymphos I employed there, the bar that sold cheap liquor at high prices and the crooked tables, the miners went back to their work well satisfied but broke.

By the summer of '89 I had total control of the colony and it was time to take the next step in my plan. I went back to Earth and 'found' my son. The old man had dropped dead a couple of weeks before I arrived-it's useful having a doctor with a drink problem and a lot of debts on my payroll-and the old woman had sent Gabriel to an orphanage that was even more bleak than the farm where he'd been living.

I arrived on my son's tenth birthday and rescued him from his life of misery. I told him a sad story about how his mother had abandoned him as a baby; she'd never wanted him and only stuck around because I'd paid her. I made sure he knew his mother's name, and made sure he hated her. Gabe believed me when I said that his mother had run away and sold him to the old couple who'd raised him. He even believed that I'd been searching for him for nine long years; he was real happy that I'd found him and that he was coming home with me to have the life he deserved as my son.

Gabriel was an angry little tyke, full of frustration and outrage at the way he'd been treated all his young life. But he was fit and strong, made that way by the hard work he'd been forced to do on the farm. His education was lacking, as he hadn't had much schooling, but I knew he'd soon catch up back on Draxis, because he was a smart little bastard, full of devious plans for how he was going to get rich and powerful. His anger, his cunning and his ambitions made him exactly what I needed.

So here we all were on Draxis, playing at happy families: me, Gabriel and Anna, who cooked and cleaned for us, and provided other services for me as and when I needed them. Not that she was the only woman I took care of in those parts. There were still a couple of ladies I found it useful to bed regularly, one of whom I was on my way to visit when Gabriel stopped me in the hallway of our home.

"Where are you going?" He'd turned twelve a couple of days before, and I'd taken him on a fishing trip in the woods and started to teach him about some of the powers he'd inherited from me. He was still too young to tell what he'd got from his mother, but he'd picked up the trick of visualizing what he wanted and making it real pretty quickly. He seemed to think this made him tough enough to challenge me.

He'll learn, painfully if needed.

"None of your business, son. Go do your homework. Your teacher tells me you've been slackin'." I was on my way to see Gabe's teacher right then. I've always had a hard spot for a schoolmistress, and this one had a way with candles...

"Nelly and Booth are coming over, and we're going to do our homework together." Gabe grinned at me and winked.

Nelly was two years older than Gabe and Booth-my son's best friend-and I was pretty sure she'd been introducing the two boys to things that most twelve year olds only dreamed about. I knew

damn well she'd been falling on her back with her legs apart for some of the other boys around town, so it was no great surprise when she'd started wagging her tail at Gabe, being as he was the son of the richest man in town.

She'd first tried wiggling her pretty little ass at me; I'd told her I wasn't interested, but to come back when she was sixteen and had some experience. Far as I could tell she was working hard at improving her skills. The way she was going I'd be sending her out to work in the whorehouse as soon as she was of age.

"Make sure that the homework is the only thing you're doin', son. Don't let me catch you doin' anything else, you hear me? Specially not Miss Nelly No Knickers." Gabe ain't stupid. He got the message. I wasn't telling him not to do whatever he wanted with Nelly, just not to let me catch him at it. He's learnin' that he can do what he wants as long as he don't get caught.

I whistled softly to myself as I drove to the schoolhouse, where I was meeting up with Miss Melinda Martin, a teacher who'd been known to forget to wear her panties on occasion.

We made ourselves comfortable at her desk, with me sitting in the teacher's chair with my shirt off and her on the desk, straddling me. She held a candle and was dripping the hot wax on my chest, sending ripples of pain and pleasure through me. I planned on turning her over soon enough and applying hot wax to some sensitive parts of her anatomy, but for the moment, I just leaned back and enjoyed myself.



I was not best amused by the explosion outside that snapped me out of my pleasurable moment. "What the fuck...?" The first explosion was followed by another, and I leaped to my feet, pushing Miss Martin and her desk away from me and grabbing my shirt. I ran to the window and peering out I could see the town hall was ablaze, and a fighter of some kind I didn't recognize was headed straight for the schoolhouse.

"Get down!" I yelled at the schoolmistress and threw myself under one of the desks as the fighter let loose another shot. The room shook and the windows shattered, but somehow we were both still in one piece as the aircraft shot overhead, shaking the room with the sound of its passing.

Melinda was screaming and annoying the hell out of me. I had more important things to deal with than her hysterics. "Get yourself down in the storm cellar and stay there until this is over."

She started whimpering at me, "Connor, what's going on? Who's doing this to us?"

Like I knew? I was paying good money to keep raiders away from my colony, so someone had gone back on a deal with me and they were going to pay for that. Someone was going to get hurt for this.

But first I had to make sure my son was safe.

I keyed Gabe's code on my commlink and when he answered, yelled, "Go down to the cellar and stay there. If you feel like taking Booth and Nelly with you, fine. I don't care what you do down there, just stay put until I come get you, you hear? Now move!" I cut the call and coded another number, one that put me through to my contact in the raiders.

While I was waiting for the call to go through, Melinda was still whining at me, and there were more explosions outside. I was getting seriously pissed about the damage that was being done to my property. One of the fighters roared in again and this time the schoolmistress had the sense to do what I'd told her earlier. She scrambled for the trapdoor to the storm cellar and pulled it up, then dropped down into the darkness below.

For a moment I considered joining her, but decided I needed to be where I could see what was going on. My call went through and the voice said, "This isn't a good time, Black."

I yelled down the commlink, "You think it's a good time for me? Do you hear that, Boyle?" Another explosion sounded on cue. "That's the sound of my property being blown to hell and gone. You people are supposed to stop that happening. We had a deal, Boyle, and you know what I do to people who betray me."

To his credit, Boyle sounded as surprised as I was. "Connor, I don't know nothin' about this. Let me make some calls, I'll get back to you."

"Better make it quick, Boyle, or I'll be taking my losses out of your hide."

The noises outside had subsided, but I could still hear the sound of crashes as buildings set alight earlier started to fall. The Rage threatened to take over at the thought of how much damage was being done to my town, my people and my reputation, but I clamped down on it. This wasn't the time to go into a Rage driven frenzy; I needed to keep my wits about me.

Looking out of the window, I could see a few people emerging on the streets, starting to make attempts at putting out the fires. It was probably pointless, and the raiders might come back at any time, but I couldn't afford not to be seen out there, leading my people. So I gritted my teeth and joined the bucket crews, getting my hands dirty, helping fight the fires through the night.

By the time dawn broke, we could all see how much harm had been done. Roughly a third of the town had been damaged in some way, some parts almost leveled. But at least the hospital hadn't been hit, and the doctors and nurses there were treating casualties and sending most of them home as fast as they could turn them around.

I was trying to reassure a group of townspeople that I had things in hand when I felt a presence behind me. I span on my heel and yelled, "I thought I told you to stay in the cellar until I came to get you. What part of that didn't you understand, son?"

My son looked scared for a moment, then he pulled himself together and stood up to me. "The explosions stopped and I thought I might be able to do something up here. Nelly and Booth have gone to see if their homes are still there. Our house is fine."

I reined in my temper and nodded curtly. "Go get Miss Martin out of the schoolhouse cellar and take her home. She was a bit shook up last night." I'd had every intention of getting her more than a bit shook up, but I'd been rudely interrupted. Someone was going to pay for that, too.

My commlink vibrated against my wrist and I saw the caller was Boyle. "Have you got this sorted, Boyle? Who's going to pay for this?" I hissed into the commlink.

"Connor, this has nothing to do with us. Can you talk right now?" That meant he had something to tell me that he didn't want others to hear and I probably wouldn't want eavesdroppers myself.

I said, "Hold on," then walked back to the now empty schoolhouse. "Talk, and make it good."

Boyle continued, "This is a bunch of aliens, they've come in from some other universe, linked up with the Drakh, and now they're taking out small settlements all over our territory. You know we have contacts with the Drakh, and we've been supplying them with weapons and provisions for years, but it's taking a while to get through to them. Based on what we've heard about their tactics so far, they'll be contacting you soon and giving you a choice. You work for them or you die."

I laughed and said, "That's not the sort of deal I do, Boyle. Tell your people to get a message to these bastards and let them know who they need to talk to here. I've got a deal to offer them and they'll regret it if they don't listen. Just make sure they know who to contact. Black out."

I cut the connection and thought for a moment. Two different types of alien, one from another universe? That must be the universe Angel had told me about, the one another Excalibur had come from, with another Space Cadet on board. As if one of those sanctimonious idiots wasn't enough, now we had to have two of them in my universe, and one of them was married to my Angel.

The anger at that thought threatened to send me spinning off track, but I reined it in again as I worked out that if these new aliens had teamed up with the Drakh, then I had a bigger problem on my hands than two annoying spaceship captains. I was going to have to deal with aliens who hated humans-all humans. But then they were going to have to deal with Connor Black and I never went to the negotiating table with an empty hand. They wanted something I had and they were going to have to pay to get it.

While I waited for the aliens to make contact, I left the schoolhouse and started organizing repair crews to fix up the properties that were repairable, and demolition crews for those places that weren't. I kept reassuring my people that things were back under control, that there would be no more attacks, and we'd soon get things running smoothly again. My people do like to hear that the trains will run on time.

I drove over to the hospital-fortunately my vehicle had been undamaged in the raid. I'd have been seriously pissed if there'd been so much as a scratch on the paintwork-and walked around, talking to the people who were still being treated there, again reassuring them.

There was this one guy, Victor, who'd been a thorn in my side in the mines for a while, one of the original settlers who objected to the new guys I'd brought in. He was in a side room, on a ventilator with all sorts of other machines hooked up to monitor him. I managed to accidentally kick the plug

out on all the machines without anyone else seeing what I was up to. You've gotta take advantage of the opportunities that life presents.

After I'd done my rounds, I had a talk with the hospital chief who told me we'd lost five people in the attack. Of course, I knew the count would soon be six, but they hadn't found old Vic just then. Even so, five was too many, and some of them had been good, loyal citizens. I'd look after the families that were left behind, but I planned on getting my costs more than covered by our attackers. A little profit on the deal would help soothe my hurt feelings.

I was just leaving the hospital when my commlink sounded. I answered, "Black, go," and the voice I then heard made a scratchy, grating sound.

"Surrender or die."

Short and to the point at least. I walked to where I couldn't be overheard and responded, "Try again. Kill me or any more of my people and there won't be any mines left for you to drill. I know how much you need those metals and minerals, and you can have them-at a price. Let's talk about the price, shall we?"

"We will kill you all and take what we want." This moron had a one track mind.

"The price just went up and it'll go up again every time you threaten me. Try scanning the mines, and see what's stored underneath. I got a dead-man switch on remote, and if anything happens to me then you can say goodbye to everything."

There was a long silence, during which I guessed they were scanning the mines as I'd suggested. What they would see was a stockpile of nuclear weapons I'd acquired a few years back for exactly this kind of situation. Draxis had been obliterated once by the Centauri, and although the frontier had been peaceful since the Centauri joined the ISA back in '78, you never knew with those fan-haired freaks. So I'd made sure I had a warm welcome ready for them if they ever came poking their noses and their 'sixes' in my direction. I'd take on their six with my one any day.

The scratch finally came back on the line. "We come." They must charge a fee per word where they come from.

"Fine. Come on down to the co-ordinates I'll send you." I sent them the location of my house, then scooted off home, kicked Gabe out and told him to go see Booth or Nelly, told Anna to hide in the cellar, then settled down to wait on my front porch swing, relaxing and enjoying the fine weather.

My house is a way out of town, well screened by trees from the road and nosy neighbors. So no one would have seen the small shuttle that landed on my front lawn. Nasty yellow and black, spikey looking thing it was, too. Not something you want the neighbors to see visiting.

I watched as a ramp lowered and one of the Drakh emerged. That alien sure had been hit with the ugly stick; in fact, I think it must have been beaten half to death with the whole tree to get that ugly. The scaly skin wasn't well complemented by the two head crests that swept up and back, making it look like an alligator that'd had an argument with a taffy-puller.



The Drakh swept down the ramp from its ship, its robes swirling about it, and strode across the lawn towards where I was sitting, my arms spread along the back of the porch swing. As it climbed the steps of my porch I rose casually from the swing, and stood to greet it. We were pretty well matched in height and I could see that its eyes were red. Don't they have a decent eye wash where they come from? No wonder they're so bad tempered.

Scratchy grated out, "We will take you and torture you until you beg us to kill you. Then we will take everything on this planet for ourselves." That was downright chatty for him.

I grinned back at him. "Now what did I tell you about threats? The price you're gonna have to pay if you want those minerals just went up again. And maybe you should know that the remote detonator for those bombs is linked to my blood pressure. Too high or too low and...well, you won't want to be on this side of the plant when the mine blows. So I'd cancel the torture session if I were you. And start being polite. Then we might be able to deal."

Scratchy just sort of hissed at that one, but eventually he started talking sense and we thrashed out a deal. He and his fleet got regular supplies of metals, minerals and foodstuffs at a price that would make me a good profit. They also got to use the continent on the far side of the planet as a base and a refuge if and when they needed it. I got reparations for the damages done in the attack, plus bonus payments for every life lost.

I thought we were just about done when he said, "We will ensure your loyalty to the Drakh Entire. You will carry a Keeper."

Now I'd heard about those Keepers. Little scaly things that attached themselves then dug their tentacles into the nervous system; they could control their victim and feed information back telepathically to the Entire.

I grinned again and said, "You might want to reconsider that, Scratchy. That could be a very bad idea."

The Drakh went back to his stingy use of words, "Obey."

"Well, OK, but don't say I didn't warn you." I took my time unbuttoning my shirt and pulling it back from my shoulder to bare my neck. As I did so, Scratchy unfastened his robe, and ripped a scale off the front of his chest, leaving a raw, weeping patch of flesh beneath. Damn, that must have hurt.

The scale uncoiled several feelers, which it used to scuttle across the floor towards me. I felt it wrap a tentacle around my leg and start to climb my body, heading for my neck. Not the most pleasant sensation I've ever felt. When it settled on my shoulder, I felt a sharp stab of excruciating pain as it dug into my neural pathways. I gritted my teeth and hissed at Scratchy, "You're gonna pay for that, too. You ought to remember, the link from these things goes two ways." Then I unleashed the Rage.

The demon that lives in my body couldn't wait to get out and find a new victim to control. It surged down the neural connection to the Keeper and from there into Scratchy's brain. For a moment I could see inside its mind and from there into the mind of every living Drakh-the Entire. But the Rage focused on Scratchy and let loose its considerable powers of control on the Drakh.

I watched as Scratchy's head went back and he let out a howl of anguish and rage. He wasn't enjoying having that demon in his head, that was for sure.

But at that same moment, I felt liberty for the first time in my adult life. The demon no longer sat on my shoulder, watching and driving all my thoughts and actions. I was free to do what I wanted, and the freedom was intoxicating. I could make my own choices, exercise free-will, not just the illusion. I found I didn't want it back. I didn't want it running my life, making my choices. I wanted to stay free.

Scratchy was having a seriously bad time, and had fallen to the floor, thrashing and rolling around. Next thing I knew, the Keeper on my shoulder was detaching itself, but before it withdrew completely, the Rage came rushing back through the connection between us, and took up residence again. I felt its power again and I knew I'd been a fool to want to give that up.

As Scratchy pulled himself up from the porch floor, I slowly buttoned my shirt back up and said, "Told you that was a bad idea. That just cost you an extra ten percent on all the figures we agreed. Just be glad my blood pressure didn't spike."

I sat back on the porch swing and watched as the Drakh staggered back to his ship and took off. It had been a trying day and I was tired. So I called Anna out from the cellar and told her to go run me a hot bath, then get ready to scrub my back.

13th July 2291

Matthew Gideon

We'd got back to Minbar two days after closing the rift, leaving five White Stars in Sector 14, just to make sure the singularity settled down and didn't cause any problems. To be honest, I have no idea what we'd have done if there had been problems, but it just felt better having them there, watching. The Excalibur, White Star Prime, and the other eighteen White Stars made their way back to Minbar. The crew of the Excalibur and the White Stars were overdue for a period of rest and recuperation and the ships themselves needed a little TLC in the dockyards before they could go out again on patrol.

So Deborah and I had a house full of guests, as John, Luke, Lily, Jack and Angel all decided that the Entil'Zha's residence would make a fine vacation home. Marcus was pleased as there were now five extra people to dote on little Jean-Luc, who was thoroughly spoiled by his great-aunties and uncles. Suddenly, my son was noticeably absent during diaper changing time. Duty seemed to call at some very convenient times.

While I was delighted that John, Luke and Lily had come to stay, I was more ambivalent about Jack and Angel. After all, they had their home parked down at the Ranger's landing field, so why

couldn't they just stay on board? But then again, it did mean I got to see Angel every day they were with us, and that's never a hardship.

*What ~~was~~ a hardship was putting up with Jack and his snarky comments about how old being a grandfather must make me feel. He also made a comment about my motorbike which implied a familiarity with my old bike on the Excalibur-and yes, I know that *technically* it was Deborah's bike, but we all knew that was just an excuse-which made me narrow my eyes with suspicion. Exactly who had been riding my bike? Now I'm beginning to sound like Poppa Bear from the Goldilocks story.*

What was even worse was going to work every morning and coming home each evening to find my doppelganger enjoying the comfort of the swing I'd installed on my porch, often in the company of my wife and my grand-son. The image of Jack sitting on that swing with Angel on one side of him and Deborah on the other, with Jean-Luc on her knee, could leave me chewing the inside of my lip for hours.

*Somehow the keys to my motorbike got mislaid during that period. And I know that makes me sound like Jean-Luc on one of his off days, but I wasn't having *anyone* ride that bike except me and my wife.*

Just to add to the strain of keeping on good terms with my relations, the news coming in from our Ranger outposts at that time was pretty grim. The Rangers had over the previous five years managed to put a stop to nearly all Raider attacks on remote colonies and settlements, but now they'd started up again. Whenever a Ranger ship jumped into a system, the Raiders evaporated, but as soon as we left, back they came. And they were getting bolder. Bigger settlements had come under attack, and we were getting reports that indicated the invader command ships might have had a presence in some of those attacks. But as fast as we could move ships in, they moved out and we couldn't pick up their trails.

It was a frustrating two weeks, and the low point was when a report came through that the planet killer had been used again. This time the attack was in Brakiri space, on the planet Lorka VII.

*I had no great fondness for the Lorkans; they were supercilious, condescending bastards, and two of them had tried to kill me a couple of decades ago-and yes, I *do* nurse grudges that long-but that didn't mean I wanted them wiped out completely. Not before I'd had chance to slap them, anyway. But it seemed that their 'Most Holy' hadn't been able to protect them against the planet killer, and the Brakiri were up in arms about the invasion of their territory. Fortunately, that was mostly Deleenn's problem rather than mine.*

I just continued to grind my teeth, trying to figure out where the next raid would happen, and get my ships there beforehand. We just couldn't see the pattern to the attacks, or the reasoning behind them. In some places it seemed they were after supplies, particularly of rare metals and minerals, but in other places, like Lorka VII, there was no apparent reason for them to be a target.

Unless the technology that had been left behind by the original inhabitants of that planet had been more important than we'd thought. That was a scary possibility. Had the natives of Lorka VII been in some way related to the builders of the Great Machine on Epsilon III? If there was a relationship, we'd never found it and it was too late now. Both planets were gone.

By the time the Excalibur was ready to leave Minbar, I had no clear idea of where to send her. I'd pulled all the White Stars off the hunt for the remaining four invader command ships, as the search was getting nowhere. I spread my forces around to protect as many planets as I could, and waited while we tried to work out what would happen next.

So I wasn't in the best of spirits at the start of the dinner Deborah and I hosted at my house on the night before John, Luke and Lily were going back up to the Excalibur. Jack and Angel had decided to stay on Minbar for a while longer, although to my mixed delight and dismay, they planned to move back to Serenity the following morning.

I'd asked Jack a couple of times whether his business was suffering from his prolonged stay on Minbar-not hinting really-and he'd told me that he could control things from pretty much anywhere these days. In fact, he and Angel had been discussing whether to settle down on a planet at some point, but hadn't as yet been able to decide where they wanted to live.

This was one of many subjects discussed over a long, leisurely and very pleasant dinner, where we'd been joined not only by our family-including my 'nephew', Vya and my son Marcus, who had his commlink tuned to the monitor in the nursery so he could respond to Jean-Luc's calls if needed-but also by Marcus Cole, Susan Ivanova and Talia Winters.

It was a little cramped with twelve of us around the dinner table, but the food was good and the conversation wide ranging and varied. By the time we got to cheese, port and coffee (another English tradition to which my wife had introduced me and which I had adopted with enthusiasm) we'd settled on the latest events in Jack's business, which turned out not to be doing as well as he'd hoped.

"We lost another ship this week. That's the third this year. I know you've got your hands full protecting planets these days, Matt, but how about sparing a little time to look after commercial shipping, too?"

I was surprised at this comment, as this was the first I'd heard about Jack's losses. "Is it just you, Jack, or have other businesses been losing ships?"

Jack proceeded to bend my ear-no comments please-about how many trading ships had been going missing recently. I looked over at Marcus Cole who I could see was listening with avid attention. "Marcus, do you know anything about this?" Marcus Cole was responsible for the Ranger's intelligence gathering as well as his role as a teacher of the Ranger trainees.

"No and I'm really not happy about the fact that none of my agents have been reporting this problem to me. They should have been picking up this sort of thing. They're well rewarded for any information they pass on and they should know the sort of thing we're interested in. I'm going to have some very severe



words to say to them in the near future and..." Fortunately, Ivanova grabbed his wrist and squeezed it to shut him up before I could do so by squeezing his throat. Marcus Cole has that effect on me sometimes.

I turned back to Jack. "Where can we get data on the losses, Jack? I'd like to find out where and when they've been happening."

Jack said, "I can give you exact details about my own missing ships and getting hold of the rest shouldn't be difficult. Most owners will carry insurance of some kind, and there's a central register of shipping losses held back on Earth."

Marcus Cole butted in, "That's right! Lloyds of London is still just about the biggest shipping insurance market in the ISA and what they don't insure directly, they'll have a share in reinsuring. They used to ring the Lutine Bell whenever a ship was lost, and as far as I know the bell is still there, in London. We should be able to get a download of data from them on all losses. Entil'Zha, can I use your office for a moment? I'm sure I can get something quickly, even if it's the middle of the night in London. They may call New York the city that never sleeps, but the City of London doesn't take many naps either."

I nodded my permission and Marcus Cole left the dining table, but I noticed he took his glass of port with him. It was a rather fine vintage and hadn't been cheap, which made me think of something I'd meant to ask Jack earlier. "If shipping losses have increased recently, has that impacted on the insurance rates?"

Jack nodded. "Damn right it has. And those costs get passed onto the consumer. Which is why the imports of Earth food and drinks that you love so much, Matt, have gotten much more expensive recently." That was interesting too. Maybe the guerilla warfare that was being carried out against the ISA wasn't the only attack we were suffering. Maybe there was a quiet but steady attack on our economy going on in parallel.

It occurred to me that if we added the shipping losses to the data we had on the colony attacks, we might be able to see a better pattern than had previously been apparent. At that moment, Marcus Cole came back into the room, waving a datapad excitedly. "I've got it! A full report on all losses recorded by Lloyds of London this year, with details of where and when each ship was last heard from. They were delighted to provide the data and very excited about the prospect of the Rangers investigating the losses."

Great. Now I'd have Lloyds of London on my back if I couldn't find a solution to their problems. Just what I needed; more pressure.

I threw back the last of my port-sacrilege and stood abruptly. Looking round the table, I said, "I hope you'll excuse me, but I have to go back to work. Marcus and I need to get down to the Comms Room to see how this data fits in with everything else we have."

Marcus Cole and I started to leave, but soon became aware that John and Jack were following closely. John grinned at me as I turned to tell them to stay and said, "I want to see this giant map table of yours in action, Matthew, and I think Jack deserves to be in on this, as it was his comments that started you off in this direction."

I didn't waste breath arguing, just waved them to join us, walking briskly down to the Admin building that housed the Comms Room. I would normally have used my motorbike to get down there, but as I said, I'd mislaid the keys just then...

A few minutes later the four of us stood around the map table, and I asked Marcus to display the locations of all settlement attacks, then add in the data on shipping losses. The 3-dimensional display sparkled with lights, far more than I felt comfortable with. I walked around the map table, looking at the projection from different angles, when suddenly it hit me. I was seeing something that looked like a small dandelion clock on a stem. A voice came from the raised area that surrounded the map table. "It looks like a virus, spreading through the galaxy."

I looked up to see that it was Luke Raven who'd spoken, and he was accompanied by Deborah, Angel and Ivanova. I thought about telling them that this was none of their business then decided it wasn't worth the effort. Anyway, they might have insights I could use. The four newcomers descended into the map pit, each taking their place by their partners. Deborah moved to my side and I put my arm around her, enjoying the feel of her warmth against me.

"You're right, Luke, it does. And that gives me an idea." I turned to Marcus. "Run it again, but put incidents up in the order they happened. I want to see a time-lapse exposure of the way these attacks have developed."

While Marcus was working on this, Deborah spoke softly. "The others stayed at the house to help Marcus and Vya with the clearing up. Lily's going up to bed when they've finished and she says to send her men home to her when you're done with them. Talia said thanks for dinner and she'll expect Susan and Marcus when she sees them."

Before I could reply, Marcus Cole said, "Here we go," and the map table came alive. We all watched as lights started to crawl through the space displayed, and now we had both sets of data, a pattern started to emerge. First an irregular cylinder of white lights, each representing a lost ship, made its way in a reasonably straight line through ISA space, with an occasional red light, indicating a colony attack, dotted along the path the white lights made. After a while the progress of the lights seemed to hesitate, then explode outwards, with the lights now moving out in a spherical shape.

"Rewind the time-lapse to the point before the direction changed," Marcus did as I asked. "What's the date? When did they change direction?"

Marcus looked down at his data-pad. "Between June 28th and July 2nd on the old Earth calendar."

So something had happened around those dates. I wondered what that could have been. We'd closed the gap into the invaders' universe just before then. Could that have something to do with the change in direction? "What star system is at the position where the direction changed? Can you narrow it down at all?"

Marcus zoomed the map in on the area where the cylinder of lights stopped, then said, "Interesting. There's a system that sits at the center of that sudden change, but we've had no reports of attacks from there."

I checked the map again and realized that the system in question was on the border between Drazi and Centauri space. I pointed this out to Marcus and asked, "Could that be why we haven't had a report? Could this one have fallen through the gaps between their territories?"

Marcus looked skeptical. "Possible, but unlikely. Our sources of intelligence are good in both the Drazi Freehold and the Centauri Republic. Neither lays claim to any planets in the area, although there was an old Drazi colony on Draxis, which is nearby, but that colony was destroyed back in '62. There were rumors that humans had taken over the defunct colony at a later date, but we've got no definite information we can rely on. I think perhaps we need to change that, don't you, Entil'Zha?"

I could only agree. A planetary system that existed at a point where the pattern of attacks on shipping and settlements had changed; surely that had to have some significance? Before I could comment further, Marcus went on, "As I'm responsible for intelligence, I really think this is a mission I should carry out, Entil'Zha. A quick jaunt over there to see what's going on might be in order."



I looked from Marcus to Ivanova who stood next to him, and I was about to refuse Marcus' request when Susan caught my eye and said quietly, "Matt, you really should send Marcus to look into this. You know he's the most experienced intelligence gatherer you have."

I couldn't deny that, but I hated the thought of putting Marcus at risk. I owed Ivanova too much. But in the face of her insistence I could only nod my agreement. "We'll discuss the mission parameters in the morning, Marcus. It's getting late, so I think we should all turn in."

Turning to my guests I thanked them for their assistance, then Deborah and I ushered them out of the building into the darkness outside. John and Luke started to make their way back to my house, followed by Jack and Angel, who took a slightly different, less direct route back. Both couples soon disappeared into the gloom. I started to wish Marcus Cole and Ivanova good night when Marcus interrupted me.

For once he sounded serious, all the usual prattling mannerisms put aside. "Matthew, I know why you're reluctant to send me out on this mission, and Susan, Talia and I are grateful for your consideration over the last few years. But you need me to investigate this and what's more, you need to send Vya with me. He's the best undercover operative you have and if you don't use him on this, he'll feel he might as well not be a Ranger. I know it will be hard for you to put him at risk, but that's the job we do. We walk in the dark places no other will enter, We stand on the bridge, and no one may pass. We live for the One..."

I was grateful he didn't finish the Ranger credo, but I knew he was right. Before I could answer him, Deborah said softly, "Marcus, I do understand what you're saying, but please, don't ask me to agree to sending Vya into danger. He's all I have left of Illas and her family. I couldn't bear to lose him."

I felt the ripple of distress that Deborah couldn't control as she gripped my arm and said, "Please, Matthew, please. Don't let anything happen to Vya."

What could I do? What could I say? Marcus was absolutely right but could I really cause my wife such anguish? Could I risk the loss of the sole remaining member of her sister's family? This wasn't something I could make an instant decision about, so I just said, "We'll discuss it in the morning, Marcus. Thanks for your help this evening. Good night."

Marcus and Susan both nodded their goodnights, then left, heading back to their quarters at the other side of the compound. Deborah and I stood in the darkness for a moment, then I turned and pulled my wife into my arms, kissing her gently on the forehead as I whispered, "Deborah, please don't make me choose between my job and my family. Let me think about this overnight and work out what's best for us, for Vya, for the Rangers and for the mission we have ahead of us." I put my fingers under her chin and lifted her face until I could look into her eyes. "Will you give me a little time to think?"

Deborah gave me a smile, but I could see her lips were trembling as she said, "Of course, Matthew. And I'll try to accept whatever you decide you have to do."

It was the best I could ask for, so I leaned forward and kissed her gently on her shaky mouth, running my hands down over her hips, caressing her body as I pressed myself tightly against her. I wanted to drown in that kiss, pretending that I didn't have responsibilities; that I wasn't going to have to send more of my people into danger.

When we finally broke for air, Deborah leaned her head against my shoulder and whispered, "It's a lovely warm night. Shall we find a nice bench somewhere and just sit for a while?"

That sounded like a wonderful idea, so we made our way slowly back towards our house, with Deborah pressed tightly against my side.

We arrived at a small arbor that was well sheltered from view, and I pulled my wife into the darkness and whispered, "From what I could feel just now, someone forgot to put her panties on tonight. Did you have any plans in mind?"

Deborah sighed and I could almost feel her determination to lighten her mood, to push away the fears that Marcus' suggestion had raised in her. She made a supreme effort and laughed softly, "I think it must be old age. I seem to forget to put on my panties quite often these days."

As I lifted her skirts and slid my hand between her legs, I tried to match the lighter mood by laughing quietly and saying, "Which way do you want it? From in front or behind? On top or underneath?"

Deborah's voice was deep and throaty as she growled, "All of the above. Anything worth doing..."

I think it's fair to say I was successful at distracting my wife from her worries that night.

John Matheson

Luke and I sat on the porch swing, enjoying the warm night, the quiet and each other's company. Soon we'd go inside and join Lily in bed, but for the moment, we were just savoring a moment of peace. We'd been sitting for maybe twenty minutes when an unmistakable wave of passion swept over us. Luke laughed and said quietly, "It's been a long time since I felt that. Matt and Demon must have stopped for a quickie on the way home. It's a good thing all the buildings in the compound are shielded."

Trying to ignore the effect Demon's orgasm had had on my own libido, I said, "Matthew was very wound up tonight. I suspect this is Demon's way of getting him to unwind." Another wave hit us and I took a deep breath, thinking of ice cubes, "But I think he's getting her wound up instead. Maybe we should go inside."

Luke said, "In a minute, but there's something I wanted to talk about first." He took my hand, and despite the darkness I could see that he was looking at me closely. "I've been thinking a lot since we left Sector 14. I've been thinking that maybe it's time we considered leaving the Excalibur."

Even though Luke couldn't have been able to see my face clearly in the shadows, I know he sensed my astonishment as he went on, "I know this will surprise you, but I think I've had enough of running the Medbay. I've had enough of the injuries, the pain, patching good people up and sending them back to their stations, knowing that some of them won't survive the next battle. John, I've had enough of battles and dealing with the consequences. I don't want to see any more bodies torn apart by explosions, battered by collisions, mangled by...something. There's always something. Something that's trying to kill us. I think I've had enough of that."

As Luke spoke I could hear the emotion in his voice, and I leaned forward to take him into my arms, trying to comfort him, wishing that I was an empath rather than a telepath, so I could soothe his pain. I kissed the tears from his face and asked, "Why didn't you say something? You know I could have stepped down at any time over the last few years."

Luke pulled himself together and said, "I know. But I also know how much you've enjoyed being Captain of the Excalibur, and honestly, I've enjoyed my job, too. But those weeks in Sector 14 were brutal. I can't face the prospect of going through that again, year after year, I just can't do it, John, I'm sorry." He started to sob quietly and I felt completely inadequate.

How could I have not felt his pain before? I'm a telepath for heaven's sake! I'm supposed to be sensitive to the people around me, yet I'd missed this in the man I loved most in the universe. The sense of my own inadequacy threatened to overwhelm me, but I pushed it aside. This wasn't the time to wallow in my own guilt.

"I'll talk to Matthew and Delenn tomorrow...today" It was past midnight local time. Minbar's shorter days could sometimes catch me out. "Nureel is ready to take over, I think. I'll resign immediately." It was the only thing I could think of that might ease my partner's pain.

To my surprise, Luke sat up and almost shouted back at me, "No! You can't do that. You know you'd never forgive yourself for leaving the Excalibur right now. There's too much going on and



Nureel isn't ready yet. I know why you chose her as your XO. You saw something in her that no-one else had seen. Beneath all that spiky Warrior attitude, she's got the qualities you've been looking for in a replacement for a long time. She's a great leader, a good strategist and an excellent tactician. And although she'd deny it herself, she has compassion for her crew and for the people the Excalibur is tasked to protect. But she needs more training and she needs to learn to let that compassion show now and again. You're the best mentor she could possibly have, so don't deprive her of your guidance and training, just because I'm having a wobble."

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "A wobble? Is that was this is? It sounded a bit more serious than a 'wobble', Luke." I'd been amazed by Luke's analysis. I'd never told anyone of my hopes for Nureel or about the qualities I saw in her. Yet my non-telepathic, non-empathic partner had seen what I was doing, when nobody else had, when everyone had questioned my decision to make her my XO. Yet again I was overwhelmed by the love I had for this 'mundane' man, who was so very far from ordinary.

"OK, maybe a bit more than a wobble, but we don't have to rush anything. I just want us to start thinking about what we do next and when. I know Matt and Delenn would like you to take over from him as Entil'Zha at some point, but we have no idea how long that will take. Matt's fit, strong and enjoying his life. I don't see him retiring any time soon." I could sense Luke's despair at that. The thought of struggling on for years while we waited for my next position to become vacant was one he found difficult to live with.

I pulled Luke into my arms and hugged him tightly. "I think it may come sooner than you might imagine." This was difficult because I didn't want to betray my old friend and mentor, but I needed to reassure my husband. "You're right when you say that Matt is fit and strong, but he isn't enjoying this crisis as much as you might think. In the past, he would relish the challenge this sort of problem created, but recently..." I paused, wanting to choose my words carefully. "Recently, I've felt a reluctance from him, and a huge sadness every time he sends his people out to fight and maybe to die. I think he's getting tired, Luke. Tired of writing all those letters to the families of people he's lost. And I know Demon senses that tiredness. That's why she's doing what she's doing right now." As if on cue, another wave of passion swept over us where we sat.

I laughed and stood up, adjusting myself carefully to prevent chafing, "And Demon's sendings are having their usual effect, so let's go wake Lily up in the way she likes best."

Luke leaned in to kiss me, then said quietly, "Let's see this crisis through on the Excalibur, and when it's over, we can talk about the future. For now, all I'm interested in is who's going to end up in the middle tonight. My money is on Lily. What do you think?"

I kissed him back passionately, then took his hand to lead him into the house, saying, "One thing I learned from Matthew is never to bet against a sure thing."

Jack Gideon

Angelique and I had found a quiet little nook to play in when the first of Demon's sendings hit us. I hadn't felt one of those since my wedding night and it tipped me right over the edge, taking my wife with me. As I gradually regained control, breathing heavily, feeling the sweat of Angelique's body pressed hard against me, I couldn't help but wonder what it must be like to do that to a woman, to be able to feel her orgasms up close and very personal.

Don't get me wrong, I love my wife, and no other woman in the galaxy will ever take her place, but sometimes I wondered. What must it be like to be Matt Gideon? Did he know that sometimes I looked at his life and envied him? Envied him his wife, his children, his grand-son, his job, his responsibilities and yes, even his motorbike with those mysteriously 'lost' keys.

*Then I looked down into the bluest of blue eyes of the woman I adored and realized that Matt probably envied me sometimes, too. He probably envied my freedom from the responsibilities of job and family, envied me *my* wife, my life and particularly my ship. I'd seen the look in his eyes when we'd taken him on a tour of Serenity. He would have loved to own a ship like that.*

Angelique smiled as she looked up at me and said, "Matt and Demon are having fun tonight. Do you think we should have a little more fun too?"

"Damn right we will. But this time, you can go on top." I rolled over and looked up at my wife, utterly contented with my lot.

Susan Ivanova

Knowing that Marcus would soon be leaving made our love making in a quiet corner of the Ranger compound somehow more intense. We knew that Talia was waiting for us at home, but just then we wanted to be alone, just the two of us, enjoying each other. It had been many years since Marcus had been qualified to hunt unicorns, and he was the tenderest lover I'd ever known. We were both lifting towards climax when it hit us like a tsunami. I'd never felt anything quite like that; the intensity of the orgasm that followed was incredible.

Marcus looked down at me and smiled, "I assume that was Demon. It would seem that an empath's orgasm is quite different to that of a telepath."

He was quite right of course. When Talia, Marcus and I made love, we entwined physically and mentally. But nothing quite like what we'd just felt.

I leaned back, panting to regain my breath and couldn't help but laugh. "You know I've never found Matt Gideon particularly attractive, but if he can do that..."

Before I could finish, Marcus took my mouth in a kiss that went on and on. When we finally broke for air, he looked down at me passionately and said, "Don't even think about it. And don't let Demon catch you thinking about it. She can get very possessive, you know."

I laughed again. "So can I. So if you're quite finished talking, I think you'd better show me why I shouldn't think about Matt like that."

So he did. Again and again. Matt who?

14th July 2291

John Matheson

It was quite late by the time Lily, Luke and I went down for breakfast and Matthew was already in his office. Jack and Angel had left for Serenity and Deborah wasn't around, so we got ourselves breakfast, smiling silently at each other, happy at what had led us to oversleep. Our tiger Lily had indeed ended up in the middle, as she so often does.

When we'd eaten I kissed my spouses goodbye as they went back upstairs to pack our things and get us ready to return to the Excalibur, while I went to Matthew's office and knocked quietly on the door. Summoned by his reply of, "Come in," I entered quietly.

Matthew's office made me envious. It held all the latest technology for accessing and displaying data, as well as connecting him to his Rangers all over the ISA and beyond, but it was also homely and comfortable. The wall behind his desk was filled floor to ceiling with bookshelves, which were in turn filled with books. Real books, with covers and paper pages. The furniture was comfortable too. Matthew's chair was large and made to look like leather, built to swivel and tilt. His favorite sitting position seemed to be leaning well back with his feet on his desk.

There were two comfortable armchairs on the opposite side of his desk, as well as a small table which had four more chairs around it, for small meetings. I knew that larger meetings were held next door in the dining room. Overall the décor reminded me of an old-fashioned English gentleman's club, and I almost expected to smell leather and tobacco in there. Instead there was light scent of jasmine, coming from flowers in a vase on the small table. I was sure they'd been placed there by Demon, as Matthew would never have thought to put flowers in his room.

It was a good place to live and work, and I wondered when this office might be mine. I decided then that I wouldn't change a thing when that time came. If it came.

Matthew grinned up at me and waved me to one of the chairs, looking a lot more cheerful than I'd seen him look for days. "Sit down, John. Your timing couldn't be more perfect." And I'd been thinking I might get an innuendo laden comment about 'getting up' late.

I sat in one of the armchairs and raised an eyebrow in query. Matthew lifted his feet off the desk and sat forward in his chair. "I've been trying to think for days where the best place would be to send the Excalibur. I had an idea last night, and now I've made up my mind." He turned to the viewscreen and said, "Display co-ordinates for Epsilon III in green and Lorka VII in red."

The viewscreen showed an image of the ISA territory-only 2-dimensional but installing a map table in Matthew's office would have taken up too much space-with the locations of the two planets destroyed by the planet killers highlighted. Matthew then said, "Orient map to show image from the center of the galaxy, looking out towards the rim." The orientation of the map changed so we could see a slice through the horizontal axis of the galaxy. "Display location of Sigma 957 in blue."

Another light came alive then Matthew gave his final command. "Display direction of attacks on shipping and settlements before Earthdate 30th June this year." A bright line appeared on the screen.

I stood and moved closer to the viewscreen. "That's..." I searched for the best word and could only say, "Fascinating."

Matthew laughed. "I think I need to check those ears of yours again, John. But yes, it's interesting, isn't it?" The line now displayed ran directly from the Epsilon Eridani system, through the Lorkan system, and was pointed straight at Sigma 957.

"It occurred to me last night that the attacks of the planet killer ship may be connected to places where ancient races had left behind advanced technology. Technology that might be of use to the ISA. Whoever is behind all these attacks-and I strongly suspect it's the Drakh, who have teamed up with the remaining invader command ships-doesn't want us to get access to that technology. So, if I'm right, the next place they'll hit will be Sigma 957, which is one place where we know one of the First Ones' races was based."



I nodded, "They were called the Walkers of Sigma 957, weren't they?"

Matthew nodded and waved me back to the armchair. "Yes, and they left the galaxy along with the Vorlons, the Shadows and the other First Ones back in '61. We know the Shadows' planet of Z'ha'dum exploded after they left for the rim. We also know that the Vorlons have protected their planets in a way we still don't know how to get around. The only other location we have for a planet that was used by one of the ancient races is Sigma 957."

He pointed at the screen, "And interestingly enough, the line of attacks seems to indicate that the planet killer is headed in that direction. Extrapolating a course from only two points isn't exactly a sure thing, but putting the facts we have together, I think there's a good chance that the planet killing ship is on its way to take out its next target. And I want the Excalibur to be waiting for them when they get there."

Looking at the screen again I asked Matthew to display the location of Minbar, and I could see what he was planning. "If we leave now and proceed at maximum speed we should get there a couple of days ahead of them. But Matthew, do you really think the Excalibur alone can..."

Matthew interrupted before I could finish. "Hell, John, I'd never send you in there alone. I've had the navigation teams working like beavers since dawn, and they've worked out that if you go a little

slower than top speed, you can get to Sigma 957 in three days, and by the time you get there, we'll have over one hundred White Stars waiting there for you, including the ten new, enhanced ships and you'll have command of the whole fleet. I think if all eleven main guns let loose at once, even a planet killer is going to struggle."

I let out a sigh of relief. I'd thought for a moment...I should never have doubted my friend and mentor. He would never send me on a suicide mission. Nevertheless, I felt I had to ask, "If I can persuade Luke and Lily to stay here, can..."

Matthew interrupted again. "They're welcome for as long as they like, John, you know that, but I'd be amazed if you could get them to stay. I know Deborah would never allow me to leave her behind. I wish I could come along for the fight on this one, but..." He waved at the box full of data crystals on his desk, "there's just too much to be done here on Minbar, to keep the White Star fleet flying and operational. I can delegate a hell of a lot to Trulann and Deborah, but there are some things I have to do myself. I wish I could come with you, John, I really do."

I smiled and stood, offering my hand across the desk to shake. I don't do that often, as most non-telepaths are wary of touching me. Matthew never hesitated. He stood and leaned across the desk, shaking my hand firmly as he said, "Good luck, John. Shoot one down for me."

"I'll do what I can, Matthew. You know, I'm almost glad you're not coming along for the ride; this way I get to be in command of a whole fleet! I just hope we have the right target."

I looked back at the viewscreen and the data displayed there, as Matthew said, "I'd better be right, John. If I'm wrong, I'm leaving over a hundred planets and Ranger bases without a White Star guard. We'd all better hope I've called the odds right this time."

I turned back to Matthew and smiled. "If I've learned one thing over the years, Matthew, it's never to bet against you. I'll go talk to Luke and Lily, then get straight up to the Excalibur. Send the coordinates we need to the bridge and we can get going within the hour."

I turned to leave Matthew's office, and heard him say softly as I left, "Safe sailing, John. Make sure you come back in one piece."

That was advice I had every intention of following.

Matthew Gideon

Once John had left, I sat and brooded for a little while. I'd tried to sound as confident as possible when sending John back to the Excalibur with his new orders, but inside I was worried sick. What if I'd got it all wrong? What if...I stopped myself in my tracks. No point in second guessing myself now. I'd made a decision, and implemented it. Only time would tell if it had been the right one. But now I had another briefing to carry out, and I was not looking forward to it.

Just to add to my woes, I was also worrying about my daughter, Mattie. Her school year had ended a few days before, and for the moment she was staying with the family of a school friend on Earth. But she wanted to come back to Minbar to spend the summer with her mother, brother and me, as well as her nephew, on whom she'd doted during her previous visit a few months earlier.

We'd made arrangements for her to board a civilian liner travelling from Earth to Minbar in seven days' time, but now having learned about all the shipping losses the previous evening, I was wondering if this was such a good idea. Maybe Mattie would be safer staying on Earth.

But then again, what if I was wrong about the planet killer's next target? What if Earth was the next planet to be destroyed? Worrying about the safety of every sentient being in the ISA was one thing; worrying about my daughter's safety was entirely different. I could feel the anxiety for Mattie knotting into a tight ball in my stomach, adding to the apprehension I was already feeling about the other two members of my extended 'family' with whom I had my next meeting.

My head was telling me that the two people who were coming to see me were the best options for the mission ahead, but my heart was screaming that I shouldn't send them; I should keep them safe on Minbar, and send someone else. But what Marcus had said to me the previous night had hit home.

If I kept him and Vya on Minbar all the time, they wouldn't feel like Rangers. And that wasn't fair; they'd both been members of the Anla'Shok for longer than I had. They were Rangers who 'walk in the dark places'. I knew I should let them go do the job they'd been trained for. But would Deborah ever forgive me if anything happened to Vya? Could I forgive myself?

I was still vacillating on the issue when there was a soft knock on the door. I called, "Come in," and the door opened. Marcus Cole stuck his head round the door and grinned at me.

"Is this a good time? I've got the mission plan you asked for, so we can go over it now, or we can come back later if you're busy now, it's no trouble you know, your wish is our command, well, you are Entil'Zha so that goes without saying, but there, I went and said it anyway didn't I? Oh well, too late now..."

This could have gone on for hours, so before Marcus could lose his thread completely, I butted it and said, "Come in and sit down, Marcus. Is Vya...?"

My 'nephew' appeared behind Marcus, answering my question. Before Vya could join us, I asked, "Could you just give me a few moments with Marcus, please Vya? I want to speak to each of you separately."

Vya nodded solemnly. "I'll wait in the living room, shall I?"

"That would be great, thanks Vya." My 'nephew' pulled the door closed, leaving me alone with Marcus Cole. "Have a seat, Marcus. Before you begin, I want you to know that I've spent most of the night thinking about what you said before you left. And you're right, of course. I can't protect you from the dangers of the job you've sworn to perform. So I have to let you go on this mission, much as I don't want to."

Marcus' face broke into a wide grin, and I could see he was about to speak, so I held up my hand to forestall him. "But I can't let Vya go with you." Marcus raised an eyebrow in surprise, but to my amazement, actually said nothing. I went on, "I know Vya would be a useful asset on a mission like this, but if I'm sending you out, I need him here to carry on the training work you've both been doing."

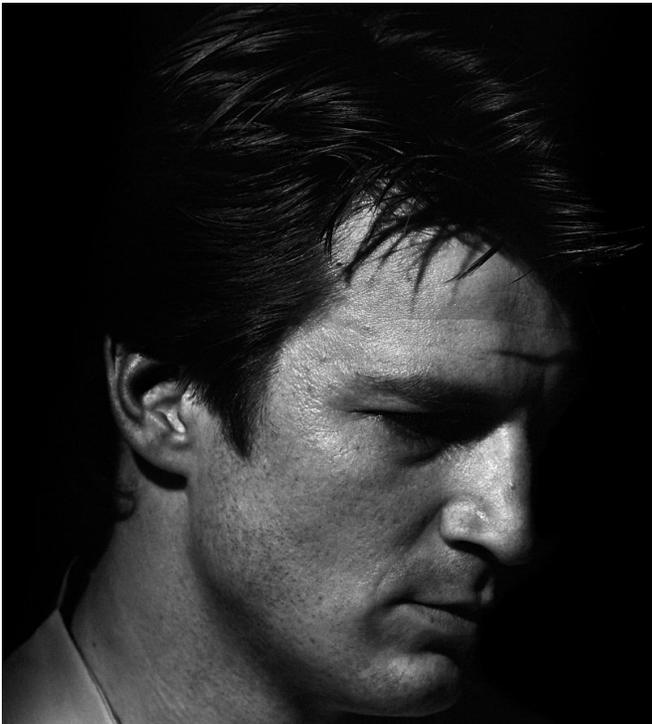
This time, Marcus spoke before I could stop him. "Is that the real reason, Entil'Zha, or is it more personal than that?"

I leaped to my feet and started pacing the room. "Of course it's more personal! How can it not be? I've known Vya since he was a baby. I was with him when his parents were killed. His mother died saving Deborah's life and probably the life of everyone on board the Excalibur. And Deborah and I promised Ilas that we'd take care of her children. We failed miserably with Ilori, and we've never forgiven ourselves for her death. How can I send Vya off on a mission that might kill him? I just can't do that, Marcus. I can't do that to Deborah, and I can't do it to myself. It would feel like one more broken promise to Ilas and to Dureena. I owed them both so much, but I couldn't even bring the murderer of their child to justice. How can I do anything that endangers their only surviving child now?"

I ended by flinging myself back into my chair, then leaning forward to glare at the man on the other side of the desk. Marcus looked surprised at the emotion I'd just displayed. I didn't often relax enough around anyone but Deborah to allow them to see the depth of my feelings, but on this one topic, I had to make him see how I really felt. How else could I justify the decision I'd made? I went on, "I won't send him with you, Marcus, but I'll send the next best undercover operative I have. Fortunately, he's just arrived in response to the general recall of all Rangers that we sent out. He's available for this mission at once, if you agree to have him as your partner in this."

Marcus started to smile. "If you mean who I think you do, then I have to agree, he'd be good."

I smiled back. "The name I have in mind is Malcolm Fillion. Is that who you thought I meant?"



Marcus nodded. "He's a good choice, Entil'Zha. He operated under cover for years with his old ship, the Lion. I know he was devastated when he lost that ship and his crew, but he got on with the job afterwards, never wavering from his duty. He's one of the best."

I was actually surprised by how concise Marcus had been in his response. Now how could I ask my next question so I got another succinct answer? I decided to just go for it.

"Marcus, give me brief details of how you plan to get to Draxis and what you plan to do there. Emphasis on brief."

Marcus' mouth opened then closed again. He took a moment to marshal his thoughts then said, "Right. White Star to Zhabar where we meet up with a Drazi trader contact. Drazi ship to the Draxis system. We'll scout around a bit in the system, just to see if there's anything odd going on there. If we find anything, we'll call back here and let you know. If not, we'll move onto the planet, where we'll go in as miners looking for work in the

mines there. I'll be an old hand, experienced miner-I have the background knowledge for that and we've set up a work record trail in a number of mining colonies if they check-I'd planned to take Vya in as my nephew just learning the ropes. I'm sure Mal Fillion can come up with an appropriate back story to be my companion."

Marcus grinned and went on, "We can always pretend to be an old married couple if necessary. I did that with my old friend Stephen Franklin once, and let me tell you, that was quite a story! Have I ever told you about playing 'I Spy' with Stephen when we were on a very slow freighter to Mars? He didn't seem to find the game amusing so I started singing to him instead. I was giving a wonderful rendition of 'A Modern Major General', but Stephen threatened to take my Denn'Bok and..."

I was laughing as I tried to interrupt the story before Marcus could give every little detail. For once, my interruption worked and got him back on track. "If we get work in the mines, we'll start picking up what information we can about recent events in the colony, any unusual occurrences, contacts with aliens, and anything we can find out about who the important figures in the colony are. It shouldn't take long to discover if there have been any new happenings significant enough to account for the change in the direction of the attacks. In my experience, most miners are incorrigible gossips. If there's been nothing, then we'll know we're in the wrong place and we'll get out. The Drazi trader will come back and pick us up."

I nodded. It sounded like a good plan, well thought out, using Marcus' experience from when he ran his family's mining business on Arisia, before he joined the Rangers. I only had one question about the plan. "You're placing a lot of trust in this Drazi trader. Are you sure he or she is reliable?"

Marcus nodded. "The trader's name is Droshan, son of Drosak. I was stationed on Zagros VII before the Shadow War and Drosak piloted the ship that got me through the Centauri blockade back in 2260. Drosak was killed getting me out, so I've done everything I can to help his family since." He smiled as he went on, "Even when I was in cryonic suspension, the pension I was due from the Rangers got paid to Drosak's family. No one really expected me to come back from the dead."

I couldn't help but laugh again. Marcus' resurrection was one of the times my wife and her sisters had got a little carried away with the use of their powers. I seemed to remember being a little miffed about it at the time, but now I just said, "Just goes to show, you can't keep a good man down... or frozen for that matter."

I went on, "OK, that all sounds good. Mal Fillion is waiting for you back at the Comms room. When can you leave?"

"This afternoon. White Star 47 is due to go out on patrol around the Drazi Freehold territory, so we'll hitch a lift with them, and they can drop us off on Zhabar in a couple of days' time. It will then take another three days or so to get to Draxis and do some scouting around. We should be on Draxis within a week. Droshan will stick around in the system until he gets the signal from us to come back and pick us up. We'll send progress reports to him when we can get messages out undetected and he can forward them back here."

Marcus stood and said, "If that's all, Entil'Zha, I'll be off back to my quarters for an hour or so, to say goodbye to my family."

I nodded, "Of course. Take care. I want you back here as soon as possible, and all in one piece, OK?"

Marcus grinned, "Absolutely! Susan and Talia would never forgive me if I left any important bits behind."

With that he stood, gave a brief bow, then started to leave. Before he got to the door, I said, "Could you stop by the living room and ask Vya to come in now?"

Marcus looked back at me seriously. "How are you going to explain this to him? He won't be happy, you know that, don't you?"

I nodded. "I know. I just have to find a way to explain it to him that he'll understand. Wish me luck."

Marcus nodded. "All the luck I can spare, it's yours." He left, pulling the door closed quietly behind him. I couldn't help but wonder if I would ever see him again.

Before I could descend into a nice wallow in guilt and despondency, the door opened and Vya stuck his head around. "Marcus said you're ready for me now?"

I smiled and waved him to the seat in front of my desk, wondering how I could tell him what I'd decided. He was in his natural form that morning. The blue eyes he'd inherited from his father always looked strange staring out from his golden skin, and his purple hair added to the slightly odd appearance, but the family had got used to this over the years. Now he looked at me curiously and said, "What orders do you have for me, Entil'Zha?"

I snorted, "Knock it off, Vya. When it's just the two of us, it's Matt or Uncle Matt if you insist."

Vya smiled. "Uncle Matt does feel more natural somehow. Even if you're not really my uncle. We're not really related, are we?"

I sensed some strain under that question, and it bothered me. "Family isn't just about blood, Vya. It's about love. My wife and her sisters loved your mother as much as they could ever love a blood sister. That makes Deborah your aunt and you get me as an uncle thrown in for free. You're one of our family, Vya, please don't ever doubt that."

I took a deep breath and almost blurted out, "And that's why I can't send you on the mission with Marcus Cole." I could see Vya was about to protest and I carried on quickly. "Vya, I've always tried to keep the promises I've made. Sometimes I've succeeded and sometimes I've failed miserably. There are two promises I made to your parents that I couldn't keep. I feel bad about them almost every day. I never caught the killer of Dureena's first child and I didn't keep Ilori safe from harm."

Again, Vya opened his mouth to speak, but I drove on, "I couldn't do anything about Ilori's sickness, but I can keep you safe, Vya. I can do that much for your parents at least. God knows it's little enough, but please, let me do this one thing. Let me keep you by my side, let me keep you as one of my family, please, let me keep you safe here on Minbar."

Vya frowned across the desk at me. "I know that's really important to you, Uncle Matt, and I really appreciate it, but somehow..." He trailed off and I stayed silent, giving him time to think through

what he wanted to say.

Finally he took a deep breath and went on. "I always wanted to be a Ranger you know. Right back from when your son first told me about them, back on the Excalibur. And I loved being a Ranger, right up to the time of the Nabula expedition. But somehow since then..." He trailed off again, and I wondered where he was going with this.

I waited for him to continue, which he finally did. "Losing my parents on that mission took all the joy out of being a Ranger. It made me question whether I was really cut out for the work. I've carried on because this is where the only people I really think of as family are. Since I lost my parents and Illori, I couldn't have asked for a better family than you and Aunt Demon have given me. You've been kind, caring and Marcus has become one of my best friends, but..."

He trailed off again, avoiding direct eye contact and again I waited. Eventually he looked me in the eyes, took another deep breath and said, "I want to be amongst my own kind. I want to be with people who look like me and understand what it's like to be me. For the last seven years I've lived amongst people from every race in the ISA, but never with my own species. When my mother was alive, I didn't see her much after I joined the Rangers, but we'd speak and link often. She understood what it's like to be different. To be able to look like any other species, but never really to know what it is to be myself. Oh, I'm getting this all wrong, it's so hard to explain." He looked at me with those bright blue eyes and I could see the distress he felt.

"Just take it slow. Tell me what it's like to be a shape shifter. I'll do my best to understand." I tried to reassure him.

"Oh, Uncle Matt, sometimes it's wonderful. To be free to be anything I want to be. I can make a Minbari think I'm Minbari, or a Brakiri think I'm Brakiri, I can feel what it's like to be a Narn on their home-world, seeing the colors they see, smelling the scents of home. You have no idea how different each planet looks to the natives of that world. To a human, the Drazi home-world of Zhabar is dark, hot and dry, but to a Drazi, it's heaven. A human can't smell all the wonderful scents that waft over you when you open the doors of your ship when you arrive on Zhabar, but a Drazi can, and when I'm in Drazi form, I can, too. That's the good side. But it's not all good."

I nodded and let him continue.

"If I'm in Drazi form," He shifted and suddenly I had a Drazi male sitting across the desk from me, "I feel as a Drazi feels. I get angry if someone tries to give me orders, I get outraged at disloyalty and dishonor. I can't help those feelings, they're part of the physical make-up of the race. If I take the form of a Religious Minbari, then I feel all the obligations of duty and respect that goes with that caste. If I take Warrior form, then I feel aggressive and belligerent. And every time I take a different form I seem to lose something; I lose contact with who I am. Who the real person is inside all the different shapes. Uncle Matt, sometimes I have no idea who I really am."

I didn't need to be an empath to feel Vya's pain. I rose and walked round my desk, then pulled Vya to his feet and hugged him tightly. He sounded so young and so unsure of himself. I had to remind myself that he was a few months younger than my own son, even though he could now be middle aged for his own species. He was only twenty-one Earth years old, but his mother had been old at

thirty. Would Vya age as quickly? We had no way of knowing. But to me it felt as if he would barely have time to grow up before he would grow old.

Perhaps that's the way it is with all of us. We spend our lives trying to figure out who we are, and before we know it, our life has gone, no matter how slowly or quickly that happens.

I pushed Vya back to arm's length, but held onto him as I said, "Vya, there's nothing unusual about not knowing who you really are. We're all making that up from day to day, and don't let anyone ever try to tell you differently. But I think I can understand what you're saying, and how it must be more difficult when you're constantly changing your physical form. What can I do to help you?"

Vya looked at me and smiled painfully. "I'll agree to stay here on Minbar while the current crisis continues, but when it's all over, when we've beaten the bad guys again, can you let me go? Will you release me from the Rangers and let me go to be with my people? They've been settled on Drathun III for seven years now. I want to go there and live with them for a while. Maybe there I can find out who and what I am."

I nodded and smiled. "Of course I'll release you, Vya, if that's what you want, but why don't we say it's a temporary reassignment? You'll be the Ranger liaison on your people's new home planet. Live there, live with them, learn what it's like to be among your own kind, and report back to me, and to my successor when that time comes, so we can understand your people better. Who knows, maybe you'll recruit some new shape-shifter Rangers for us?"

Vya laughed and shifted back into his usual human form. His whole demeanor changed with the shift. He seemed much more the old cheerful Vya I'd known when his family was still alive. "I may just take you up on that, Uncle Matt. Now I'll get back to my job in the Comms room, and leave you to do your job of saving the galaxy"

I laughed and shooed him out of my office. Then I slumped in my chair, wondering how I was going to do that job in the weeks and months ahead. How I was going to protect all the people I loved as well as those whose safety I was responsible for? There were so many unknown perils ahead of us. Draal had been right. Darkness was indeed descending on us all, and I had no idea when we might see the light again.

*But in the meantime I resolved to send one of the new White Stars as escort for the liner on which Mattie would be travelling to Minbar. That was one small part of the universe I *could* protect.*



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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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