

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four B - Part 1: Keeping up with the Joneses

by The Space Witches



The Witches of Eriadne use all their talent against the Joneses.

Chapter 3

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - shortly afterwards

Lily had taken a blanket with her, which she placed under one of the trees in the orchard section of the hydroponics garden. While she smoothed the soft fabric, she smiled as she remembered her hand-fasting ceremony, which had taken place there only three months earlier. *[[And you were part of it too, my darlings,]]* she sent, as she looked over to where Faylinn and Dasha were inspecting the bark of a tree. Somehow, that reminded her of 'her' Brakiri children back on Eriadne, and how much she'd enjoyed teaching them. She was surprised to find she missed that, leaving a big the hole inside her, which had been filled by her duties as a teacher.

She took a deep breath. [Well, now you have these two to teach, it's just slightly different material as yet. But that will change soon, and in a few years you might count Marcus among your students, too--they will all need a certain level of private tuition, even with online lessons readily available on any number of subjects. Not even the best simulation can replace the occasional hands-on approach.] A naughty smile spread on Lily's lips, as she thought how much Luke had enjoyed her hands-on approach, earlier. [Get a grip, girl! You wanted to draw a bit, while the young ones are occupied, remember?]

She took a sketchbook and a set of graphite pens out of her bag, and sat back against the tree, closing her eyes briefly, as she took a deep breath, before touching her pen to the paper.

Alden Catches was accompanying two of his team members for that morning's measurements. He could only take so much sitting in his tiny quarters, staring at the steadily incoming and unchanging flow of data. In the late morning, they were nearing what according to the Excalibur's blueprints, was the hydroponics garden.

Alden had to admit he was curious to see it. He'd never before been on a ship with a mission long enough to require a hydroponics garden, or owners eccentric and rich enough to afford one. Even if only concentrating on common vegetables, the soil, air, light, humidity, and temperature still had to fulfill certain requirements, and even adapted plants needed a daily cycle. And they needed water--a rare commodity on any long-range starship.

The door opened in front of Alden, and he stepped inside, letting his gaze wander over the vegetable beds. The light was surprisingly like real sunlight, and the temperature was that of a pleasant early summer day in a moderate Earth climate. Taking in the whole room, which was about half size of the gym, Alden could see what seemed to be a connecting door to the next compartment. After confirming this on the ship's blueprint he had loaded onto his datapad, he turned to his companions, a male and a female, who had entered the garden after him and were looking around in wonder.

"We'll work our way through the room as usual, and then go onto the next garden section."

Alden and his companions spread out, and slowly made their way to the connecting door, along the narrow pathways between the beds. When they entered the next section, they found themselves in an orchard with various kinds of fruit trees.

While his companions moved along the walls, Alden went through the middle of the room. When he looked up from his TAD, as he was coming around a tree almost in the center, he suddenly saw Lilith Morgaine. She was sitting on a blanket in front of the next tree, breastfeeding her children, while watching the male bloodhound moving along the wall.

She must have heard Alden, or seen him from the corner of her eye, as she turned her head and looked up at him. "Good morning, Mr. Jones."

Alden bowed his head in greeting. "Miss Morgaine, good morning. I'm sorry to disturb you. We can come back later, if you'd prefer," he offered, but the tiny redhead shook her head.

"No, that's all right. You need to do your work, and I have no problem with breastfeeding in public."

"Thank you, Miss Morgaine. We'll be gone in a few minutes." He started to walk past her, but something on the blanket suddenly caught his eye. He stopped, looking down at the open sketchbook. "Are these yours?" He looked at Lilith.

"Yes," she said with a smile, "Just a few tries, to see if I hadn't lost my touch."

"May I?" He gestured at the sketchbook, and when she nodded, squatted down to pick it up, after putting his TAD down. He was aware of a pair of green eyes looking at him intently, as he flipped through its pages from the start, appraising her drawings. There were many of Deborah Gideon and Angelique Denier, and of another woman with Asian features and very complicated hairstyles. Others were of her partners and Captain Gideon, though on a few sketches she had for some reason portrayed him with longer hair, and in darker tones. Another male, and an alien looking woman, were strangers to the telepath. Alden found himself impressed. He looked at her again. "These are good."

Lilith Morgaine broke into a delighted smile. "You really think so?"

"Of course." He continued, while looking at a page showing various Brakiri.

"Thank you!" Her eyes were sparkling. "I haven't drawn in a while, but suddenly had the urge to try it again." While she talked, Lilith unlatched first the boy, then the girl, sitting them on her thighs while she adjusted her dress.

Alden smiled when he found a sheet covered with sketches of the toddlers. "Your love for your children shines through in their portraits."

"They may not have been planned, but they're our pride and joy. Right, you two?" Lilith hugged her children against her sides. They snuggled against her, beaming up at their mother, and the girl chuckled. "Of course, you're the result of me having bewitched your fathers, or so they claim sometimes." Her eyes were sparkling as she told Alden, "Did you know that I'm a witch?"

Lily laughed as FBI replied, with a smile, "I'd better be careful not to upset you then, or if I do, to have some powerful counter-magic ready."

She hadn't expected him to believe her claim of being a witch, and even if he did, he surely wouldn't guess where her powers came from. "Fortunately for you, I'm not the vindictive kind. And as long as you stay fair when it comes to this investigation..." She trailed off, as Dasha started wriggling in her arms. "What, not ready for a nap yet? Well, off you go then."

The young boy held onto his mother's hand, as he slid down onto his feet, and walked towards FBI. He came to a halt, when Lily wasn't able to stretch her arm any further. He turned, looking at her, as if asking what he should do.

"Well, young man, you'll either have to crawl, or walk on your own. I can't move with Faylinn sitting on my other leg." The little girl was watching her twin brother intently.

"Dasha?" Jones spoke up, carefully setting Lily's sketchbook aside as he leaned forward. Dasha turned, looking at the stranger as he continued talking to him. "How about taking a few steps, and then taking hold of my hand?" FBI held out his hand, so Dasha would only have to take a few steps on his own.

Her son studied the outstretched hand, and FBI's face, then looked back at Lily. She smiled and gave him an encouraging nudge through their link.

"You can do it, *Hoksila*," Jones said.

Lily had researched the Lakota since their first meeting, and recognized the word. It meant 'boy'. "Yes, Hoksila, go to the older man," she told her son, smiling.



After a short look at Faylinn, Dasha turned back to face the telepath watchdog, and Lily could feel the determination inside her son, as he let go of her hand. He took two wobbly steps, and grabbed the outstretched hand as soon as he could reach it.

Jones chuckled and told Dasha, "Well done," while Lily clapped. Dasha pressed his fist against his mouth, turning to Lily, then studied the telepath, a smile spreading around his fist.

Meanwhile Faylinn, not to be outdone by her twin brother, slid down from Lily's leg, also holding onto her mother's hand as far as possible, then she practically lunged across to FBI.

"Careful," Lily called out, more amused than concerned as her daughter stumbled, since the telepath had already reached out for her and caught her safely in his free arm.

"And this *Wicical* seems to be rather adventurous," Jones said and smiled at the girl, who gave him a big grin back.

Lily snorted a laugh. "You have no idea."

"So I guess now you're here, you want some entertainment?" FBI sat down and crossed his legs, then sat the twins on his knees and started bouncing them alternately, holding them in a secure grip. Faylinn and Dasha were soon gurgling with laughter, and Lily couldn't help but join in. After a while, the telepath watchdog changed to sway from one side to the other, telling the twins, "I have to slow down. I'm not that young anymore you know."

Lily smiled, but then her expression became serious, a slight frown creasing her eyebrows. "May I ask you something personal?"

He nodded.

Lily pressed her lips together for a moment, then asked softly, "Why did you become one of the Joneses? You're much more individual than the others." She smiled as he chuckled, and continued, "From what I've heard and experienced of the Joneses so far, you seem to be the exception to the rule. All the others seem so grim. I couldn't imagine *them* playing with my children!" She shook her head. "How can you survive among them?"

He gave the question some thought before he replied, just as softly, "I wanted to make a difference. You see, I knew that most *Joneses*," he smiled when he used Gideon's nickname for them, "Would be former Psi Cops--that was inevitable since only high-rated telepaths were invited to join this program." The telepath's eyes drifted off. "I wasn't on *their* side all my life. When I was younger, I used to be an outlaw, a blip, but after the telepath war, we were pardoned, and all strong telepaths were invited to

join the new program. It was meant to ensure that telepaths who were now allowed to work among 'normals' didn't abuse their abilities. I saw a chance to help them succeed, or at least, in the face of so many former Psi Cops who don't care for them, to even the odds a little. If only slightly." He looked into Lily's eyes. "Everybody deserves a fair chance to live the life they want to live."

Lily nodded and smiled softly. She could see in the older man's eyes that he meant what he said. He'd spoken with a quiet dignity, but even though he hadn't elaborated, Lily could feel that his life had been far from easy. She wondered when and where he had received that scar on his forehead, and how many more of them he had--physically mentally, and spiritually.

Lily found herself really liking this particular Jones. [But is he really honest? Or is he just trying to get at John through me?] She wasn't an empath, but Demon had said that she hadn't felt any underlying motivations from him at the mess hall. [I'll be careful.]

Suddenly, FBI smiled and looked down at the twins, who had gone silent on his knees. In fact, they had slumped against his arms, deeply asleep. "I think that's my cue to get back to work, before I put you to sleep, too," he said softly, grinning.

Shortly before noon, Ines León took the bullet car to the mess hall that she and her team of investigators used for meetings. She had summoned her associates for 12:00 hours, sharp, to inform them of the status regarding the medical investigation. Jules would refrain from his usual playful comments this time, no doubt. She smiled cruelly to herself, as she remembered how she had played on his fears when he had informed her about the number of civilian contractors on the ship, all of whom had refused to give blood samples for their tests. He'd left her quarters with his tail between his legs.

Ines' joyful contemplation was interrupted by new passengers entering the bullet car at the next stop. She sat on the same side as the door, at the far end, so the new arrivals didn't see her at first, but Ines immediately recognized Lilith Morgaine, and her bastard children. They were twins, she had learned, and while a telepath cavorting with 'mundanes' for anything but amusement was bad enough, the thought of an actual relationship with them, and having *children*, was sickening. [What a waste of potential!] She regarded the boy, obviously Matheson's son, wondering if he had inherited his father's talent. If so, he probably hadn't grown into his abilities yet. The lower-rated telepaths seldom did before their teens, and having a 'mundane' for his mother, chances were that his abilities would be diluted.

When Lilith Morgaine had lifted her children onto the bench and turned to sit down opposite the bullet car door, she saw Ines.

"Hello again, Ms. Jones," she said in a light voice, nodding and smiling as she leaned back on the seat.

Ines nodded curtly, eyeing the children who had already scrambled onto their knees and were crawling towards her end of the bullet car. Arriving there, they stood and traced the glowing colored lines on the map of the bullet car system with their fingers, babbling softly to each other.

"Aren't they adorable?" Morgaine asked, smiling fondly. Before Ines had a chance to react, she continued, "They are such darlings, although I just know that Faylinn is well on her way to becoming a tomboy. No wonder, growing up with two boys as the only other children on board. Just yesterday, she got herself into trouble at the crèche, when..."

Ines stared at the redhead for a moment, then purposefully looked at the opposite wall, trying to blot out the voice going on and on and on about the joys and sorrows of motherhood, and the antics of her beloved, sweet, adorable children, who were now loudly giggling, gurgling and babbling about something. Now she was really starting to feel sick. [*Please, deliver me from this nightmare!*]

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - lunchtime

"I'd have loved to see that!" John chuckled, as he took his coffee cup from Lily. They had eaten lunch together while Luke was still asleep. The twins had brought a heap of toys out of their room and were playing with them on the floor, giggling and babbling. John could make out the soft toys they had got from Demon and Matthew for Christmas: a Labrador and basset hound, which always accompanied Faylinn and Dasha to bed. Lily had nicknamed them 'Sweet Face' and 'Sad Eyes', although the Labrador's official name was Daniel, and the basset hound's name was Jake. Demon had claimed the two dogs had been abandoned by their previous owners, who had called them that. So to avoid confusing the dogs, they had decided to stick with the names.

John's thoughts were brought back to the present by Lily's rippling laughter. "Well, we now know that Boss Bitch hates children!" She sat down on the chair next to him, putting her bare feet on the edge of his seat and tucking her toes under his thigh. "But please, promise me that you'll shoot me if I ever start talking like that in earnest!" She gave him an exaggerated pleading look.

John grinned. "I'll try to remember to keep my PPG fully charged at all times."

Lily laughed, and for a while they sipped coffee silently, watching Faylinn and Dasha play. Finally, Lily said softly, "I know it may all be an act on his part, but I'm starting to really like FBI." She looked at John over her coffee cup, brows creased. "He seems to be the only Jones who treats everyone with at least a minimum of respect, and doesn't have a hidden agenda."

"I can't say much about FBI, but the impression I got the few times I talked to him seems to support what you said." John grinned as something occurred to him. "He's certainly the only Jones that Matthew hasn't complained about, so far."

Lily laughed. "Poor Matthew. But he'll find more ways to get his own back, I'm sure."

John sighed, looking into his almost empty cup. "I just wish this investigation was over. If it drags on too long, they may..."

Lily lifted her hand and put the tips of her fingers against his lips. "Don't think like that, John. Don't let your doubts eat at you, because the Joneses are just waiting for that to happen, for us to make an error. But we won't. We won't let them tear our family apart." She looked at John with such sincerity that he had to swallow the lump forming in his throat.

He took Lily's hand in his, kissing her palm. "No, we won't. After all, what chance do the Joneses stand, against the Space Witches and their families?"

John and Lily smiled at each other while Faylinn and Dasha giggled, as if in agreement.

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - late afternoon

Ines opened her eyes, growling softly as she shook her head. After the meeting with her associates, she'd come back to her tiny quarters to make some calls, and although she had gotten at least part of what she'd wanted, she'd still felt uneasy. So she'd changed into elastic skintight pants and a top that left her midriff bare, and settled on the floor to meditate, trying to calm her restless mind and the constantly simmering anger that wouldn't leave her. It didn't help. Her thoughts kept circling around the investigation, and the spanners the Excalibur crew kept throwing into the works.

[Maybe I need a more active diversion.] Unfolding her legs, Ines got up gracefully and walked over to the small wardrobe. She took out a punch ball that would self-inflate as soon as she attached it to the folding frame, with a magnetic foot she could attach to the wall. Ines always took these with her on her travels. She set them up quickly, concentrating while the punch ball inflated itself completely, before she started swinging her fists at it rhythmically.

As always when she exercised, Ines' mind started to drift. She remembered her first training sessions in Teep Town. Teep Town, her home. Her *real* home. Ines had never had another one. Her teachers had found her in her early teens, wandering the moonlit streets of Guajira, Venezuela, wrapped in rags and sorting through garbage for something edible. She had lived that way since being abandoned to die out in the wild by her parents, years before. She only came to the town at night, and left again well before dawn, to spend the days as far away from the voices in her head as possible.

Hit

Psi Cops had found her, recognized her talent, and after showing her how to block the voices battering her mind, they had taken her with them. The Psi Corps had taken her in, nurtured, raised and taught her, and for that the Corps would always have her undying loyalty. [The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father.] And she had sworn to repay them by always learning as much as she could, by being the best.

Hit

Her 'real' parents had never given a damn about her. They had feared her special abilities so much that they had wanted her to die, but they were too cowardly to do the job right.

Smash

Ines was glad she didn't have any memory of the people who had procreated her, beyond vague, blurry images. She would never be able to feel anything but contempt for them anyway.

Hit

They were like all other 'mundanes'. [Bester was right all along.]

Hit

Ines had never understood why any telepath would want to work with 'mundanes', 'normals', unless it was absolutely necessary.

Hit

When she'd first heard of the new program to integrate telepaths into 'normal' society, she'd thought, [What fool would want to work with people who require you to suppress your superior abilities, simply because they are afraid of what they can't understand and control? What a waste of talent!] She had nonetheless followed the call to become a Jones. Because the Corps, no matter what the 'mundanes' called it now, was still Mother and Father. And like every daughter, it was her duty to repay them for what they had given her. In this case, her duty was to make her superiors see that no program trying to pretend telepaths were the same as 'normals' would ever work. She had found more than enough evidence of that, and she was trying to make her superiors understand, but they wouldn't listen.

Hit

Especially since one of those telepaths, working among 'normals', had contributed to finding the cure to the Drakh plague.

Hit

Her thoughts turned to John Matheson, first telepath in Earthforce, 'Teep Hero', all around role model for other foolish telepaths who strove to do what he had done. [Role model, right!]

Hit

It wasn't enough that he seemed to be happy to work among 'mundanes', but now Matheson had entered into a relationship with two of them! Ines could understand the thrill of occasional sexual adventures with 'normals'--how eager some of them were to experience sex with a telepath, and how much easier that made it to manipulate their little minds, sometimes without them even realizing. Such encounters were nothing more than momentary distractions, amusements. But a relationship? And there was worse.

Hit

Matheson had a child with that red-haired whore he seemed to share with the ship's CMO. Again, Ines thought about how much more that boy could have been, if his mother had been a telepath who was genetically matched to Matheson. [Fool!]

Hit

[As if Gideon chose you because of your good grades at the Academy.] Gideon was known as a gambler, someone who always had an ace up his sleeve. [He'd never have demanded Matheson for his crew if he didn't have an ulterior motive. Was that what Reggie found out during his last visit here? What did Gideon use to blackmail Reggie into silence?]

Hit

[Well, I intend to find that out, and Gideon's reason for wanting a telepath on his crew, too.]

Hit

[Did he offer Matheson that red-haired vixen as compensation for some special services?]

Hit

[And because Matheson also likes men, he was offered the doctor, too?]

Hit

[Traitor!]

Hit

[Waste of talent, waste of potential, you're a waste, John Matheson]

Hit

[Waste,]

Hit

[WASTE!]

Ines hit the punch ball so hard that the frame was ripped from the wall, crashing down onto the floor and sending the ball flying. Blinking, Ines stared at it as it deflated automatically, realizing that she was covered in sweat and panting heavily. Apparently she had worked out more vigorously than she'd thought. [And longer,] she thought, after a glance at the chronometer. The meeting with the two shift groups would start in thirty minutes. [Time to get into the vibe shower,]-she grimaced, longing for a water shower--[and get dressed.]

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - early evening

From where she sat at the head of the table, Ines studied her associates. The members of the day shift had left the mess hall in the direction of the flight deck, and the telepaths working the night shift were spreading around the ship.

Reggie, to Ines' right, was gloomy, as he'd always been since coming aboard. Jules, to her left, was uncharacteristically silent and withdrawn. Alden was the only one who didn't seem to be touched by the latest developments, or by Ines' resulting mood. She glared at him down the table's length, but he ignored her.

"So we are not one step closer to a solution to this problem than we were on the day we arrived," Ines repeated the summary of the reports she had gotten during the shift change meeting. Her associates nodded silently. "Did the extra tests of Matheson's blood sample bring any hint?"

Without looking up from the table, Jules shook his head and said in a low, flat voice, "I was able to sneak a small sample out of Medbay this afternoon, while Raven was absent, and conducted the tests in my quarters. Here's all the data." He offered her a datapad.

Ines smiled inwardly. [It was about time the arrogant bastard was shown his place.]

"Could you give me good news for once?" she asked sweetly, enjoying the sight of Jules' face flushing with suppressed anger, as he swallowed a reply, keeping his eyes on the table's surface.

"Ines, your 'shoot the messenger' attitude doesn't help the investigation. It's not Jules' fault that he can't find anything. Maybe you should get used to the thought that there's nothing to find."

Ines' head whipped around to glare at Alden, who had spoken these words in a calm, firm voice. Either he was blissfully ignorant of how dangerous it was to talk to her like that, or he didn't care. "So where do you suppose there *is* something to find?" she snapped.

Alden shrugged. "All the evidence so far indicates that the source of this block is not a virus or anything similar, and neither is it a telepath or several telepaths, with unusually strong blocking abilities. Our best bet is still some sort of device." Alden gave Ines a look indicating clearly that he would not let her draw him into an argument.

Ignoring the interruption as if it had never happened, she looked back at Jules. "I will go through the data after our meeting. You'd better have been thorough."

Addressing the whole table, Ines leaned forward, forearms resting on the table top, hands folded. "After talking to the superior of that sorry excuse for a lawyer who formulated our legal warrant--sorry, *former* sorry excuse for a lawyer," she flashed a shark's grin before continuing, "I was able to convince our superiors that we need to speed up the investigation. Our new warrant will take another day to arrive, so our hands are tied until then, regarding the medical tests. The interviews have brought no results so far, and neither have the TAD tests. Even working 24-7, it would still take us weeks to finish checking the Excalibur's installations against the blueprints. Assuming everyone was working at top speed." Ines shot Reggie a look, pleased to see him flinch.

Letting her eyes roam over her associates, she continued, "The brass at Earthforce and the Inter Stellar Alliance are getting impatient, because the Excalibur and her crew are being held up. So, if we don't find the cause of this telepathic block by tomorrow night, we are authorized to use an alternative way to extract the truth." Ines' lips quirked into a malicious smile.

When Reginald left the mess hall, he thought to himself, [I doubt this will be as easy as Ines thinks. Knowing Gideon, he'll find some way to sabotage her plan, or if not him, then Matheson's family.] He stopped in mid-stride as something occurred to him, but he dismissed the thought immediately. [No, that's ridiculous. Isn't it? 'Mundanes' wouldn't...]

Shaking his head, he went to check up on one of his teams.

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - later that evening

Alden sat in his quarters, studying John Matheson's file on his datapad for the umpteenth time. He sighed as he leaned back, looking at the opposite wall. The file told him Matheson was an intelligent young man, who was hard-working and efficient. Earlier in his military career he'd been rather shy, according to assessments of that time. Nonetheless, he had managed to work himself up to the rank of

Lieutenant. Gideon had chosen him from several possible qualified people as successor to the XO on his former ship, when she had died in an accident during an away mission. The Captain had also submitted Matheson for promotion to Commander. [Frankly, I'm surprised that hasn't already been done, after the Excalibur's crew found the cure.] But Alden didn't know the inner workings of EF, so he let this puzzle be.

All reports from the various Mr. and Ms. Jones who had scanned Matheson, had shown that he followed the new rules for telepaths to the letter. He was truly a role model for his fellow telepaths working among 'normals', or aspiring to do so.

What Alden had experienced and heard during his time on the Excalibur, seemed to support the image given by Matheson's file and the Jones reports. From conversations Alden had overheard in the Excalibur's mess halls and other public places--most people underestimated his hearing capacity due to his age--Matheson generally seemed well-liked, and certainly highly respected as an XO. Alden had only spoken to him a few times, but Matheson had treated him respectfully, and had answered his questions and handled his requests efficiently.

While Alden had been scanning the Excalibur's bridge and surroundings with his TAD, Matheson had listened to a report from the Excalibur's Second Officer, Lieutenant Jackson, asking a question or pointing out something occasionally. Their conversation had been respectful but casual, with a dash of humor. Alden had noticed that to be the general tone among the whole crew, even across species boundaries. He was aware that especially with so many different species living on board, achieving that kind of familiarity was only possible in a positive atmosphere, promoting respect and trust. The command crew of a ship set the basic tone by their leadership style, so this crew certainly deserved a compliment.

Then of course there was Matheson's family. While Alden had met Dr. Raven too briefly to form any conclusions about him, his conversations with Lilith had given him quite a bit of information about the tiny woman with the fiery hair. She seemed to have an abundance of energy and a sharp mind, with both passion and compassion. She was creative and interested in a wide range of topics. Lilith clearly adored her partners and her children, but didn't seem to be over-protective. Alden smiled fondly, as he thought about the children. [It would be interesting to follow Dasha's progress, as he grows into his telepathic abilities, and to see how it affects his relationship with his 'normal' twin sister.] The elderly telepath couldn't claim that his interest in the twins was purely scientific, though. He liked kids, and he'd very much enjoyed playing with the twins that afternoon.

For a moment, Alden felt jealous of the young Lieutenant. John Matheson led the life Alden and many other telepaths had never had a chance to experience. Part of him would have given anything to trade places with Matheson, but another part was happy to have found the living proof that it was possible for telepaths to live with and among 'normals'. Alden sighed and reminded himself sternly, [You are too old for that, Alden Catches. Let the young ones have their chance. And isn't that why you accepted this job--to help others have a better life than you had? You may not have contributed directly in this case, but it shows that your hopes aren't foolish.]

Banning these uncalled for feelings into the darkest recesses of his mind, he called his thoughts back to the real topic of his musings, and looked at the image all this information gave him about Lt. John Matheson. It was one of a man who earned the love and respect he received, of someone following the rules because he knew it was important. A hard-working, efficient, resourceful and loyal man, with a keen sense of duty, and a sense of humor. It certainly didn't fit the image Ines seemed to have, of a traitor who didn't give a damn about his fellow telepaths.

After coming to this conclusion, and especially after hearing Ines' plan for Matheson at their earlier meeting, Alden resolved not to reveal his suspicions regarding the source of the telepathic block to anyone. Not even to his superiors; not after they had agreed to Ines' plan. Even if it would prove that Matheson really didn't know anything about the block, he'd still have to suffer more than he should. And others too, probably. [Hopefully it won't come to that. After all, a lot can happen in one day.]

Deciding he'd done enough thinking, Alden got up from his chair and went to bed.



January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - late evening

Jules threw back his covers with a frustrated sigh. He'd been trying to get to sleep unsuccessfully for over an hour. Sitting on the edge of his bed in the dark, he leaned his head into his hands, smoothing back his hair. [No

use. I might just as well get up again.]

January 17th 2070 - Day 5 of the Jones investigation - shortly before midnight

Lily unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn. She was on her way home from Angel's quarters, where she and Demon had spent a bit more time than they had expected. She smiled to herself. No matter how often they got together, it seemed they never ran out of things to talk about. Of course, the Joneses had made up part of the conversation, but the rest had revolved around their extended family, other goings-on on the ship, music, movies, books--the usual.

Then Ilas had been put through by Matthew, since she'd called Demon's quarters first. Catching up took quite some time. The last time they'd talked had been almost a month before. Since Max, Dureena, Ilas and Vya had left the Excalibur three months earlier, they had stayed at Max's house on Mars most of the time, preparing for their expedition to the home planet of Ilas' race, and clearing up some bureaucratic problems in relation to the trip.

Lily smiled fondly, as she remembered their baby sister all but bouncing on her chair, when she'd told them that she and her family would finally depart the following morning. Ilas missed her sisters just as much as they missed her, and when they'd eventually said goodbye, all of them had had suspiciously shimmering eyes. [But Ilas seems happy, and I so hope that she'll find the answers she needs and deserves, on her home planet.]

"Ah, finally, a pleasant surprise! My day might not end as badly as it started, after all," a soft voice said suddenly, startling Lily out of her musings.

Her heart lurched inside her chest, as she recognized the voice, but she managed to paste a smile on her face, before turning around. "Mr. Jones, good evening, or at this time, I guess I should say good night." She frowned as she got a good look at Frog Boy, who had stopped at a respectful distance. "You don't look too well. Is everything all right?"

He smiled at her, almost reluctantly. "Today was rather taxing. I couldn't sleep, so I thought a short walk would help calm the spirit." He paused, studying her for a moment, before continuing softly, "I'm not sure if meeting you is good in that respect. I have to admit, you don't have a particularly calming effect on me."

Lily laughed lightly and lowered her eyes for a moment, before looking up at him again. "Well then, I guess I'd better go home and leave you to calm your spirit again." She started to turn away, grinning.

Jones reached out his hand, but didn't touch her as he quickly said, "Please, I know I can't accompany you, as that would seem strange, but could you spare just a few more minutes of your time? I could use some pleasant company."

[Well, if it was pleasant, I'd enjoy it too!] Lily couldn't come up with any reason to deny his wish without raising his suspicions, so she nodded, smiling. "Of course."

"It's very unusual to see you without at least part of your family, by the way," Frog Boy commented in a light tone, but Lily heard the underlying question.

"Oh, I left John and Luke to look after the children while I was out having fun with Demon and Angel." She gave the telepath a wicked grin, and he chuckled.

"It's good that you can still keep a certain amount of liberty, despite having a family."

"Oh, definitely. I'm very lucky that John and Luke allow me a lot of liberties. They know and respect that it's important to me, and it goes all three ways." She smiled, covering up her discomfort at the way this conversation was going. [Fortunately, the corridors aren't completely empty,] Lily thought with relief, as a Minbari walked past them, nodding at Lily and giving Jones a curious sideways look.

"Am I right in assuming they would have a hard time stopping you, if you really wanted something?" Frog Boy asked softly, when the Minbari was out of earshot, his eyes searching her face.

[Enough!] Lily thought. "I'm sorry, but I really need to go home now. I hope your wanderings will help calm your spirit further." Lily gave him an apologetic smile, hoping he'd think that she was just reluctant to continue this conversation in a public place, not that she wanted to get rid of him. There wasn't anyone within sight, but of course it was possible for a crew member to appear around a corner, or exit one of the doors along the corridor, at any time.

"Thank you for your time." The telepath smiled understandingly, then took Lily's hand in his, bending to kiss it. When he lifted his head again and looked at her, his eyes rested on her mouth for a moment, and suddenly he leaned in to kiss it softly. The touch of his lips on hers was feather-light at first, but when Lily didn't resist or protest, Jones deepened the kiss, pulling her nearer.

Lily was frozen, too shocked to do anything, but when she felt Jones pull her nearer, she finally found the strength to lift her arms and push her hands against his chest, drawing back and out of his arms, until they were at a distance that would be considered harmless by any passersby. Lily quickly brought her emotions under control, not letting herself show anything as she whispered, "Please, if someone saw us..."

Lily could see Jones swallow, before he said, "I'm sorry. It's not like me to lose control like that." He shook his head and continued in a low voice, "Your wild spirit drew me to you, from the moment I saw

you."

"Well, thank you for the compliment, Mr. Jones, but..."

Before Lily could continue, Frog Boy covered the distance between them, giving her a suggestive smile as he whispered, "My quarters are just around the corner."

January 18th 2070 - Day 6 of the Jones investigation - 2 A.M.

John opened his eyes, realizing it was in the middle of the night. Reaching out, he found himself alone in bed. Sleep-dazed, it took him a few seconds to realize that Luke wasn't there because he was working another nightshift. But where was Lily? He could feel that the sheets were cold beside him. She'd been to see Demon and Angel, and he dimly remembered half waking up when she joined him in bed, sometime after he'd fallen asleep. Had he imagined that, or had she got up again for some reason?

Suddenly, John thought he heard something. Sitting up, he listened intently, but couldn't make anything out. "Lily?" he called softly. When there was no reply, John slid out of bed. He first looked into the children's bedroom, finding everything was normal, with Faylinn's and Dasha's breathing the only sound. John walked out into the dark living room, treading softly with his bare feet, listening as he let his eyes scan the room. [Nothing. Damn. I'm sure I heard...]

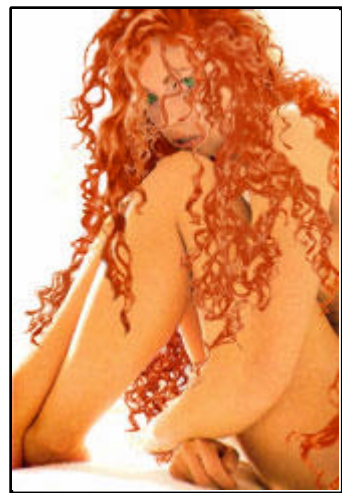
At that moment, he heard that sound again. A muffled sound. He frowned as he followed it.

When the bathroom door opened. John's eyes took a moment to adjust to the sudden brightness after walking around in the dark. Then he found Lily, cowering on the floor with her back against the wall, her head buried in her arms, trying to stifle the sobs that shook her body. Her rampant red hair was all she was wearing, but it covered her almost completely, like a veil.

He rushed toward her. "Lily? Lily what happened? What is it? Are you hurt?"

Lily, who apparently hadn't noticed him enter, abruptly looked up at the sound of his voice and half scrambled away, but stopped when she recognized him. John felt his heart stop for a moment. He may not have been able to feel her pain due to her telepathic block, but it was all too obvious in her red-rimmed, swollen eyes, looking at him between strands of red curls. He'd barely knelt down at her side when she threw her arms around his neck, sobbing into his shoulder. She tried to say something, but was sobbing so hard that she was unable to talk coherently.

"Shhh, don't talk now. I'm here, Lily, I'm here for you." He stroked her hair, laying his cheek against the top of her head and holding her shaking body gently. He was worried, very much so, as this outburst came so unexpectedly. [What happened that upset you so much, Lily?]



When Lily had calmed down somewhat, John asked her again what was wrong. "Is keeping the block up all the time too much stress?"

Lily shook her head against his neck.

"Is it something with your sisters?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Then what is it, Lily? What upset you so much?"

She sniffled, then said softly in a muffled voice, "Can't."

"Can't what?"

"Can't tell you."

"And why not?" John prodded gently.

"Just can't!" Lily lifted her head and looked up at him. "Oh John, I.... I had such a horrible nightmare!"

The look in her eyes cut into John's heart, and he instinctively drew her into his arms again as the sobs returned, kissing the top of her head as he rocked her. "It was a nightmare, nothing more. You're safe now. I won't let anything happen to you."

As if in reaction to what he'd said, Lily's sobs became stronger and louder again, and she clung to him desperately. For a while, John just held and rocked her, closing his eyes as he tried to get through to her mind as she'd shown him, to send her his love and support. She didn't let him in, but he hoped she'd notice his mental presence despite being so upset. He knew he had to get her to talk about whatever was wrong, but first he had to calm her down enough for her to find the courage. Whatever it was, had obviously frightened her, although he couldn't fathom why she couldn't tell him. Could she be afraid of his reaction? But why? She wasn't the type to shy away from an argument, or tell fibs because she'd done something wrong or messed something up.

[One question at a time. First I have to calm her down, then I can play detective.] He continued holding and rocking her, humming a melody and sending his love.

When her sobs had finally subsided, John asked, "What was your nightmare about, Lily? Why did it upset you so much?"

After a moment, she admitted softly, "I'm so ashamed."

"Why would you be ashamed because of a nightmare, Lily?" John's surprise was obvious in his voice.

"I'm such a coward!" The last word came out in a loud sob.

John lifted her head from his shoulder and pushed her back slightly, so he could look at her. "Why do you say that? You know it's not true!"

"YES it is! I can't tell you, please..." She tried to pull away, but John kept a gentle, yet firm grip on her.

"Lily, you're scaring me. Whatever it is, I can tell it's eating away at you. You're the one who always tells us to share, so please tell me, Lily. No matter what it is, you know you can tell me. Or if not me, then tell Luke, or your sisters. Tell anyone, but you have to talk about it, please. Don't pick up Demon's

'keep it all in' habit." He really was scared; he'd never seen her behave like this. [Not even when she was afraid Lucas could be the twins' father!]

"I love you, Lily. Never forget that."

He leaned forward to kiss her mouth softly, and for a moment she responded, leaning into the kiss, but then she withdrew suddenly. "Oh, John..." Her face crumpled as she looked into his eyes, and she let her head fall forward, covering her face with her hands, as she whispered, "I swore I'd do anything to help you against the Joneses."

"And you have. You and your sisters are incredible. Everybody is." John kept his hands on her arms, holding her lightly.

Lily shook her head, sniffing and laughing bitterly. "I swore it, but I'm too much of a coward to go through with it."

"Lily, please, help me out here. What do the Joneses, or you thinking you're a coward, have to do with your nightmare?"

"My nightmare has everything to do with me being a coward, and the Joneses." Lily swallowed audibly, and added in a whisper, "At least with one of them."

John remained silent, giving her time to collect her thoughts, again trying to send her his love and support, as he continued to hold her.

Finally, she sniffled loudly and drew back, letting her hands sink into her lap, as she sat back on her haunches and leaned back against the wall. "I'll... I'll try to tell you. You have a right to hear." Lily took several deep breaths, obviously trying to work up the nerve to tell him what was bothering her. Keeping her eyes fixed on her hands, she haltingly began telling him in a monotonous voice about meeting Frog Boy on her way home, then she poured out in a rush how their conversation had gone. John was barely able to follow her, as she stumbled over her own words and stopped mid-sentence several times, to take a deep breath or to sniffle. But he got the gist of what she was telling him, and listened with mounting horror, as Lily told him how Jones had kissed her, and then invited her to his quarters.

"And... and then... oh Mother!" Shaking, Lily covered her face with her hands, sobbing loudly.

John hurried to take her into his arms again, reassuring her as best as he could. "It was only a nightmare, Lily. It wasn't real." Suddenly, he stiffened. [Please...] He gently pushed Lily back, pulling her hands away from her face and holding them as he looked at her. "It *was* a nightmare, wasn't it?"

Lily didn't answer or look at him, so he added, "Please, Lily? Tell me the truth." Continuing to hold her hands, he reached out with his right hand to caress her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

Lily hesitantly looked up at him, biting her lower lip. She swallowed, then whispered, "I did meet him on my way home, and we did talk, and he did kiss me--on the cheek. But I could tell he almost... he was close to kissing me on the mouth." Lily took a shaky breath. "John, I realized at that moment that I couldn't..." She stumbled to a halt, but forced herself to continue, "I couldn't let him touch me. I mean if I absolutely knew this was the last possible way of saving you, but even then, I..." Tears started trickling out of her eyes again. "John I swore I'd do anything to help you, but I just can't do this! I'm a coward! Maybe that's my punishment. They do say 'You made your bed, now lie in it'." She tried to

smile, but failed miserably, and before she could go on, John interrupted her, holding her face between his hands.

"Lily, I'd never ask anything like that of you. I'd hate myself for letting you sleep with a man because you thought you had to, for my sake. I'd rather quit Earthforce and flee to some backwater planet with you, Luke and the children, than let you carry that burden around for the rest of your life. You're anything but a coward, Lily. You're human! That you can't just sleep with Jones, is proof enough that you're a sensitive, caring woman. You have to listen to your heart, Lily, whatever you do. You'll find ways to keep Frog Boy at a distance. Avoid him if you must, or tell him you can't do anything because Luke and I are suspicious." John distantly realized that he was crying, too. "I love you, Lily. I don't want you to get hurt trying to help me."

"Oh, John." From the way Lily looked at him, he could see she was afraid he'd only said that to placate her; that he was secretly disappointed she wouldn't go all the way.

"Let me in, Lily. Share your feelings with me, and I will share my feelings with you. There's nothing to be ashamed of." Again, John tried to reach her, and this time, after a second's hesitation, she finally let him through. He gasped as a mixture of fear, guilt, shame and anger hit him. *[[Lily, let go of these emotions. I can't bear to see you hurt by holding on to them.]]*

He opened his heart, letting her see his love and his pain, his fears, and his admiration for what she had done for him during this crisis. *[[If not for you and my whole extended family, I'd have broken down or gone mad already. But you and Luke were always there for me during these hard times, giving me strength. Let me do the same for you now.]]*

John could feel a flood of relief from Lily as she realized he really wasn't angry or disappointed. *[[Oh, Sweet Face! I love you so much!]]* As Lily threw her arms around him, the negative feelings inside her were replaced by gratitude, and a deep, almost overwhelming love.

[[Just as much as I love you,]] John sent back, holding onto her tightly. Both were crying tears of relief, and they silently shared their minds and hearts, until their tears had subsided.

[[Hey, you know what?]] Keeping his arms around her in a loose embrace, John leaned back so he could look at Lily, who looked back at him questioningly, a smile on her lips. *[[Why don't we get Faylinn and Dasha and have them join us in bed? I'll serve you breakfast in bed tomorrow--well, later this morning--and when I go to work, you three can stay there, and Luke can join you when he comes home.]]*

Lily's smile grew. *[[Sounds wonderful. It would be perfect if you could stay when Luke comes back, but we'll just have to do that the next time you can both sleep in.]]* She leaned forward and kissed him slowly, deeply, tightening her hold on him, and John let himself be immersed completely in the sensations emanating from his physical and mental connection with her.

When they finally had to come up for air, John grinned. "I'd say we should get up now, though that's just what I should *not* do, since we want to take the children into our bed..."

"Spoilsport!" Lily pouted, then grinned and jumped to her feet, holding out her hand. John took his time, letting his eyes wander up from her feet to her eyes, taking in her curvaceous naked body, framed from her hips upward by her red mane. When his eyes met hers, John smiled and accepted Lily's outstretched hand, not helping much when she pulled. Her regular Kirrak training showed, though, as she was able to pull him up into a standing position surprisingly easily for someone of her small size

and slight build. He nodded respectfully in acknowledgement of her skills.

For a moment, Lily stood there, holding onto his hand and looking up at him with a sparkle in her emerald green eyes, before breaking into a beaming smile, sending and speaking, "I love you, John Matheson."

John could feel the same smile spread on his face, as he hugged her tightly, replying in kind. "I love you too, wench."

Reaching up with her left hand, Lily scratched her fingernails lightly down John's smooth, naked chest. "Well, you'd better take this wench and her brood to bed *now*, or we won't get to sleep for a long while yet." She looked up at him, raising an eyebrow, as her hand dipped down toward his waist, but John snatched it before it could wander too low.

"OK, but you hold that thought until tomorrow night..."

Lily purred and gave him a lascivious smile. "I certainly hope I'll hold more than that thought tomorrow night."

January 18th 2070 - Day 6 of the Jones investigation - 08:33 hrs

Christina Jackson was in the map room with Captain Gideon and Lieutenant Matheson, discussing a holographic battle simulation, when Ms. Jones barged in on them. [Seems to be her usual behavior,] Christina thought, following her superiors' example and ignoring the telepath watchdog.

"By all means, don't let me disturb you," Jones said sarcastically, without greeting them, "I just wanted to let you know that I'm going back to Babylon 5 for a while. But don't worry, I'll be back by noon at the latest." She started turning away when the Captain spoke, without looking at her.

"I hope there isn't any problem with your teams over there."

Overtly, Matheson and Jackson were still watching the simulation and discussing it softly, but what was going on between Jones and Gideon absorbed most of their concentration.

Boss Bitch--[Careful, or you'll accidentally call her that one day!] Christina thought--gave Gideon a sugar-sweet smile. "Your concern for my people is touching, Captain."

"Not at all. It's just that Captain Lochley is a good friend of mine. I wouldn't want your people to give her any trouble." Finally, Gideon raised his eyes from the simulation, locking them with Jones'.

Christina suppressed a grin. From what she'd heard of Lochley and knew about Gideon, the 100 bloodhounds wouldn't stand the slightest chance against the two of them together.

Boss Bitch's voice was deceptively calm as she replied, "It's none of your fucking business what I do over there, until I *make* it your business. Captain. I'll see you later." Flashing her teeth at the three of them--Jackson wasn't quite sure that it could be called a smile--the female telepath turned and left in the direction of the bullet car.

The Captain and his First and Second Officers exchanged a knowing look, the holosim running completely unnoticed now.

"Well, *that* was a complete change of mood if I ever saw one," Christina offered softly, in her deep voice.

"Yeah, and I don't like it," Gideon said, frowning as his eyes were fixed to the spot where Ms. Jones had disappeared from their sight. He turned to look at Matheson. "Suggestions?"

The Excalibur's XO shook his head. "I don't know. But I'm sure she's planning something, and judging from her behavior, she seems to be rather sure of herself." He gave the Captain a concerned look. "If she thinks she can bring the solution to this case back with her by noon..."

"We'll have to be quick," Gideon concluded the sentence. He chewed his inner lip for a moment. "You two carry on here. I have a call to make in the conference room."

"Aye, Sir," Matheson and Jackson answered in unison, watching their Captain as he spun around on his heels and strode towards the conference room door. He turned back just as it slid open before him.

"Make sure no one disturbs me as long as I'm in this room. And I do mean *no one*, except Sheridan's office." He entered the conference room, but looked back at them one last time as he stood just inside the door. "And Deborah."

"Aye, Sir," Matheson and Jackson repeated, grinning, as the doors closed behind Gideon.

"I'd really like to know what our Captain is up to," Christina murmured to herself.

"You're not the only one," Matheson said, giving her a wry grin, "Especially since we'll be the ones who have to clean up after him, if whatever he has in mind goes wrong."

Jackson knew that the telepathic Lieutenant must be worried about whatever Boss Bitch's plan was, but he obviously didn't intend to let that bring him down. She grinned at him.

"Then we'd better hope our Captain won't make a mess of anyone but the Joneses." She lifted her eyebrows as something occurred to her. "Oh I see, that's why you assigned them a *mess* hall as meeting room... a mess of Joneses indeed!" Christina broke into a malicious grin, enjoying Matheson's chuckle and appreciative nod.

Still grinning, they started the holosim again.

January 18th 2070 - Day 6 of the Jones investigation - shortly afterwards

Like every doctor would, Luke woke immediately the comm. went off, but before he was able to completely open his eyes or sit up, he found himself pushed back onto the mattress by small but strong hands.

"Shh, sleep on," Lily told him softly, her hand smoothing his hair as she slid out of bed. He watched her as she grabbed her robe and glided into the living room on her bare feet. A few moments later, Luke

heard her talking softly, and John's voice replying. He couldn't make out their words and was too drowsy to try and listen. Lily would tell him if it was anything important.

He turned on his side, laying his arm across Faylinn and Dasha, who were still sleeping between him and where Lily had lain. The twins seemed to relish the rare opportunity to sleep in their parents' bed, since they had been awake when he'd come home, and usually they didn't fall asleep again so quickly. Luke smiled and listened to the soft voices of his lovers coming from the living room.

He must have drifted off, as he only noticed that Lily had come back when the mattress shifted under her weight.

"Problems?" Luke murmured, opening his eyes to look at Lily over the sleeping twins.

She lay down on her side, propping her head on her right hand and reaching out her left arm to cover his, enveloping the children between them. "Maybe. John thinks Boss Bitch is up to something. He wants me to link with Demon and Angel and stay linked with them, just in case. He says he thinks it would be a good idea if I stayed in Demon's quarters, with both of them, just for a while."

"Do you think it's necessary?" Luke frowned slightly, trying to blink his sleepiness away.

Lily smiled softly. "No, but John is worried, so..."

"So you'll do it to reassure him." Luke finished with a smile.

"Caught me." Lily grinned, then frowned. "The thing is, Angel will need to get time off work."

Luke's yawn turned into a melodramatic sigh. "Well, while I'm awake, I might just as well make the necessary calls to arrange for a replacement."

"Thank you, Sad Eyes." Lily leaned over the sleeping twins and kissed Luke tenderly.

When she drew back, he looked at her, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm doing this for John, not for you."

Lily chuckled. "Isn't it the same thing?"

Luke smiled, then carefully climbed over the twins and Lily, stretching when he stood. He grabbed his pants and shirt--calling Medbay in nothing but a robe might undermine his authority --and put them on, then quickly combed his ruffled hair with his hands. "I'll only be a few minutes."

"I'll come and get you if you take too long, and I won't bother dressing," he heard Lily mumble, when he stepped into the living room.

January 18th 2070 - Day 6 of the Jones investigation - towards noon

Trace Miller was shutting down the shuttle's systems, hoping that Boss Bitch--the nickname coined by the 'witches' had made its way around the ship like wildfire--would get off quickly. He didn't have anything against telepaths in general--he respected and liked Lt. Matheson very much--but this particular one gave him the creeps. The way she treated everybody with disdain, and used her good

looks to reach her goals. Telepath or not, Trace certainly didn't like *her*, so he wanted to get rid of her ASAP.

But of course he wasn't that lucky.



While she unbuckled, the attractive but arrogant leader of the telepath investigation team said, "What a quiet ride this was. Horribly boring." She obviously wasn't just referring to the smooth flight over to and back from Babylon 5, but also to Trace's silence, and his refusal to reply to any of her taunts.

Sighing inwardly, Trace decided he wouldn't get rid of her before she'd had her way. He looked up from his instruments and gave her his best smile. "Well, they only pay me for the standard service. The more exciting stuff would cost you extra."

She clearly caught his double entendre, and let her eyes wander over the young pilot's body, examining his midsection especially closely, before looking into his eyes. "I don't think you'd be up for it." Her voice was light and sweet, but her eyes showed cold amusement.

Trace raised his eyebrows. "I don't think so either. Not that the package isn't appealing," He gave her the same look she had given him, for a moment lingering on her cleavage, then again smiled at her, "But I prefer the content to have some quality, as well."

Boss Bitch snorted her amusement, giving him a last sneer before she stood and left the shuttle.

"Oh, it was a pleasure for me, too--bitch!" Trace muttered, shaking his head as he finished shutting down the shuttle's systems.

Ines left the shuttle, very pleased with herself, but careful not to let her emotions show on her face. She hadn't been in such a good mood for a long time, certainly not since setting foot on the Excalibur. And that despite being under the influence of the telepathic block again, which had reached out to about halfway between the Excalibur and Babylon 5 during her trip there and back. Trace Miller's attempt at upsetting her had only contributed to her high spirits. Lt. Matheson and his pitiful 'normal' accomplices may try to unsettle and disturb the investigation and the investigators, but in the end they would fail. The investigation *would* be a success. Ines had made all the necessary arrangements on B5 to ensure that, even if Captain Lochley had not been entirely pleased with the role she'd have to play in Ines' plan.

"You don't have any choice, Captain. Your orders clearly state that you are to fully support this investigation. Our warrant gives us the right to take any steps necessary to solve this case, and the Bureau of Telepath Integration has expressly authorized my plan, as you can see. Failure to cooperate would make you an accomplice, Captain Lochley. Oh, and I hope I don't have to remind you that any and all information concerning this investigation is strictly confidential."

Ines strode out of the Excalibur's landing bay, and down the corridor to the next bullet car stop. [By this time tomorrow, we'll have come much closer to the solution, or we may have already solved it. And then Lt. John Matheson and his accomplices will pay.] Her tiny cold smile of satisfaction was enough

to scatter any crew members who encountered her.

January 18th 2070 - Day 6 of the Jones investigation - late afternoon

It was almost 18:00 when Angel left the Gideons' quarters with Lily and Luke, who each carried one of the twins in a sling. The sisters had stayed there since the morning, minds joined in the link and alert for anything unusual, but nothing had happened.

During his lunch break, John had come by and told them that Trace Miller had talked to him shortly before noon, saying he'd just brought Boss Bitch back from Babylon 5. The pilot had remarked on her suspiciously good mood. He'd told John that according to his discreet inquiries with B5 staff--[All females no doubt,] Angel had thought with amusement--the telepath watchdog had sprung a surprise inspection on her team members, and then met with Captain Lochley. Trace had been unable to find out what the reason for Ms. Jones' visit with B5's commanding officer was.

At least overtly, the investigation had continued as usual, after Ms. Jones' return to the Excalibur. "I'm not sure if that means she's just trying to unsettle us, or if she's realized her plans need more time. So I'd prefer if you could stay linked to your sisters, at least until Luke or I can come to take you home."

Angel remembered how John had given Lily a soft smile as he'd stood to return to work, and for a moment his worry had been obvious. The tiny redhead had nodded before she'd kissed her lover goodbye. Angel knew that Lily didn't believe the Joneses could disrupt the block, and neither did she or Demon. Angel had smiled to herself. A year or even a few months ago, Lily would have lectured John on just how much the Vorlons had enhanced her blocking ability, and just how weak human telepaths were in comparison, even such a big group as was currently working on this investigation. *[[It seems having a family has made you soft, Lily,]]* she'd sent, after John had left.

Lily had snorted a laugh, then replied with a grin, *[[Sometimes diplomacy does get you farther than confrontation. I'm still working out when to use which strategy.]]*

As they wandered down the corridors with Luke and the twins, Angel listened to Lily recounting their day for Luke, inserting a comment here and there. It had been a nice surprise to get the day off work. She had been working on an interesting project, but nothing would have kept her from helping John, even if it was only by providing reassurance. He may not hold her responsible for being critically wounded by Lucas, during the Excalibur's first visit to Eriadne--and Angel knew that she really had been unable to prevent it from happening--but deep inside, a part of her still felt she owed him a lot. Maybe that was why she was still a little shy around him, though not as insecure as around... Angel shooed that dangerous thought away, returning to the pleasant memories of the day.

The witches had kept up their link all the time they were together, while playing with Marcus, Faylinn and Dasha, reading, watching movies, talking, eating, and drinking. After being linked for such a long time, Angel felt almost strange to be her own again, though she knew that feeling would pass shortly. Many people would be appalled at the thought of sharing their mind, their *being* with others, but to Angel it had something warm and comforting. She never wanted to miss the mental contact with her sisters again, and she wondered if she would have been able to give it up voluntarily, as Ilas had. Having been ripped out of their union, Angel didn't think there was anything which could compensate for that loss. *[Fortunately, I'll never have to face that again.]*

Lily was just describing how Matthew had been slightly unsettled, when over lunch, Demon had answered a question he'd asked Lily. Angel couldn't help but grin at the memory. "He really should know by now that Demon does that, whenever we're in the link."

In the meantime, they had arrived at the quarters Lily shared with her family, and Luke turned to thank her again for her help.

Angel grinned. "Hey, I'll do a lot for a day off."

"Oh, listen to her! She'd even spend a day with her sisters, just to get a day off!" Lily shot her a mock scandalized look, but couldn't help joining in the others' laughter.

"Well, my darlings, Auntie Angel has to go home and you have to go to bed soon. Be good, you hear me?" She kissed her nephew and niece goodbye, and wished Lily and Luke a good night. Taking a few steps, she suddenly hesitated and turned back, calling after them as they walked through their doors to their quarters. "Hey. I may not be the one who has hunches," Angel smiled at Lily, "but I have a feeling that everything will be all right."

"I know," Lily said firmly, sending her gratitude through the link.

Luke responded with a warm smile, "Thank you, Angel. For everything."

Angel said softly, "That's what family is for, right?" She hoped her voice expressed how grateful she was for everything they had done for her, and that she would do anything to help and support them. "Sleep tight, and don't overdo it," she added with a lascivious grin, waving at Lily, Luke, and the twins over her shoulder, as she turned and walked away, until the closing doors of their quarters shut off the two adults' mock protests.

January 19th 2270 -- last day of the Jones investigation - 08:55 hrs

Ines straightened her jacket collar, then smoothed back her hair, as she examined her reflection in the mirror. [Perfect.] Her appearance was professional, almost masculine in the severity of the cut of her clothes, but the jacket she wore outlined every totally feminine curve of her body, and was cut to display her generous cleavage. Glancing at the expanse of breast on display, Ines flushed at the memory of the less than flattering comparison Gideon had made with his wife's endowments. Well, she was going to make him pay for that. He would pay and pay and pay, until he begged her forgiveness, and she would make sure that every member of his extended family paid too. They would all pay.

With one last, self-satisfied glance in the mirror, Ines spun on her heel and swept out of her room.

January 19th 2270 -- last day of the Jones investigation - 09:00 hrs

"Take a seat, Ms. Jones." Gideon waved her to a chair in the conference room, but Ines ignored him. She went to stand in front of the viewscreen, leaning back against the shelf there, her arms behind her, pushing her breasts forward. She caught the Captain's momentary glance at the flesh so generously

displayed, before he turned and sat at the conference table. [Not so impervious to my charms after all, eh Captain?] Ines suppressed a smug smile. She was *so* looking forward to this.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Captain. I know you're not on duty until later," she purred, wanting to ease Gideon into a false sense of security. He nodded, but didn't speak, gesturing for her to continue.

"I have new orders for you, Captain, from the Bureau of Telepath Integration." She held out a data crystal, but Gideon made no attempt to take it. He just gestured at the play slot in front of the viewscreen. Ines leaned across and dropped the crystal into the slot. Before pressing the crystal fully into place, she smiled maliciously. "I don't think you're going to like these orders, Captain."

Gideon raised one eyebrow and sneered, "I haven't liked a single damned thing about this investigation so far, why would I like this? Get on with it."

Ines pressed the crystal into place, and stepped aside to allow Gideon to read the orders displayed on the screen. After a few moments of silence, Ines couldn't contain herself. Her voice was full of malicious pleasure as she said, "You'd better tell Lt. Matheson to pack his bags. He's coming with me, for a full, detailed and extremely intrusive examination, back on B5. Captain Lochley has been kind enough to arrange for a specially shielded room to be made available for this interrogation. We wouldn't want anyone to hear the screams, would we? Mental or physical. Matheson won't enjoy it. In fact, he might not survive it. And when we've finished with him, we'll use whatever we get out of him to come back for you, and we'll take you apart in the same way, Captain."

Gideon's face didn't even flicker, and the block prevented Ines from picking up his feelings. Her anger grew inside her; he was ruining her triumph with his lack of response. How dare a mere mundane resist her in this way? She pressed on, letting her sense of victory seep into her voice, "When we've torn you apart, we'll start on your family. We'll take your crew, we'll take everyone you've ever known if necessary, and we'll take their brains apart, until we find out who's responsible. And you can't stop me, Captain. You have your orders."

Ines nodded at the viewscreen, and glared down at Gideon. He sat watching her, still completely unresponsive.

After a long pause, Gideon leaned back in his chair and grinned. The startled look on Boss Bitch's face showed that this was the last reaction she'd expected.

"You fucked up, didn't you, Ines?" Boss Bitch's nostrils flared at his use of her real name; she obviously hadn't expected him to know that.

Gideon leaned back and put his feet up on the table, and his arms behind his head. Before Boss Bitch had time to speak, he continued, "You came here to prove that John Matheson was a traitor, a trouble maker and was breaking the rules, and you failed, didn't you? You can't find the source of this block on your abilities, and you don't know any more now than when you arrived, do you? In fact, you're a complete and utter failure as an investigator, aren't you, Ines? And the price of failure in your game is damned high, isn't it? What will they do to you, Ines? Ship you off to some prison planet and have you doing scans of convicted murderers and rapists? I hear that's about the worst job a telepath can get."

Ines hissed at him, "That's what I'll have your precious Matheson doing before I'm finished. I'm taking him out of here and I'll prove he's betrayed his kind. I'll break him if I have to, in fact I'd like to, but I will prove it. Now get him in here and tell him he's coming with me."

Gideon carried on grinning at her, shaking his head. "No, I don't think so. I'll get him in here, but I don't think you're going to like what I have to tell him." He deliberately echoed her earlier words. "Oh, and let's get a few other people in here, too, shall we? Let's have some witnesses."

The Captain lifted his commlink and activated it, barking a few brief orders into it. Within seconds, the doors to conference room slid open, and John Matheson walked in. He was quickly followed by Luke, Lily, Deborah and Angel, with the other three Joneses hard on their heels. John came round the table and stood behind Gideon's chair, while their family moved to stand on either side of John. The four Joneses gathered on the other side of the table.

Gideon took a deep breath and said, "Ms. Jones has brought an interesting document back with her. She thinks it gives her the authority to take John away with her, for testing and examination. Hell, I think she's planning on a dissection, if she can get away with it, but I'm not going to let her do that."

Boss Bitch almost spat at him, "You can't stop me, *Captain* Gideon." She used his title as an insult.

"Wrong." Gideon took his feet off the table and stood, leaning forward as he spat the word back at her. "As usual, Ms. Jones, you are 100% wrong."

There was a silence in the room for a few seconds, which was broken by FBI, who stepped forward and asked softly, "Could you explain that, please, Captain? I have seen Ms. Jones' orders and they seem quite clear." The question was asked courteously, and Gideon responded in kind.

"Of course, Mr. Jones. Ms. Jones may have her data crystal, containing her authority, but I have a data crystal of my own. She thinks she has an ace, but I think I have a trump. Perhaps you would like to run this, Mr. Jones." Gideon brought the crystal from his pocket and handed it to the elderly telepath, who took it with a gracious nod, and removing the first crystal, pressed it into the slot.

They all turned to the viewscreen, and Boss Bitch inhaled sharply when she saw the seal at the top of the letter displayed there. It was instantly recognizable to any telepath. It was the seal of the Senate Committee on Metasensory Abilities. Gideon spoke softly, telling himself that he was enjoying this way too much for his own good.

"My Senate Committee trumps your Bureau of Telepath Integration, I believe. Perhaps Ms. Jones would like to read out the contents of that letter? No? Then I'll summarize. This letter states that any telepath who is working for and reporting to the ISA President's Office will come under the authority of that office. The rules and regulations of the ISA in relation to telepaths in such positions will take precedence over those of the Earth Alliance. Does anyone dispute that this is a genuine statement from the Senate Committee?" Gideon knew that it couldn't be disputed. The seal of the Committee could not be forged.

There was a prolonged silence, while the implications of the letter sunk in. Boss Bitch spoke, but sounded less sure of herself than Gideon had ever heard her before. "But this doesn't change anything. There are no current ISA regulations in relation to telepaths, so those of the Earth Alliance still apply and my order stands."

Gideon sighed, "I hate to rain on your parade, Ms. Jones, but..." he paused and looked at her closely, then went on, "No, I shouldn't tell a lie. I'm sure that as a telepath following the rules, you would never

carry out an unauthorized scan to check that I'm telling the truth...oops, there I go again, telling another lie. Let me start again. I take the greatest pleasure in raining on your parade, Ms. Jones. If you scroll down, you will see that President Sheridan's office has just issued new regulations for telepaths working for the ISA. Are you able to read them yourself, or shall I summarize these for you, too?"

The Captain knew that he was being wicked, but he'd had enough of these people thinking they could give orders on his ship. He'd had enough. He gave the Joneses a few moments to read the Presidential order, then spoke softly.

"You came to this ship with a clear purpose in mind. You wanted to prove that John Matheson wasn't an honest and honorable man. You wanted to destroy his career and his family. You wanted to remove him as a role model for other telepaths, and you wanted to prove that telepaths and 'normals' can't live and work together. You failed. You failed completely. Because John Matheson *is* an honest and honorable man. He *is* a role model for how telepaths and 'normals' can co-exist, and you can't change that. But just so there's no doubt of any kind, we're going to prove it to you."



Gideon mentally crossed his fingers that John and Lily would pick up on what he had planned, as there hadn't been time to brief them before the meeting. He turned to John and asked quietly, "John, do you understand what those orders from President Sheridan's office mean?"

John nodded. "Yes, Sir. They say that I cannot be forced to undergo scans against my will. I have to give authority for any scans that are carried out, just like any other citizen." John's eyes glowed as he said the words. Gideon could hardly imagine what it must be like for John to know that he no longer had to subject himself to the mental rape he had endured so often in the past. To know that he could have his career, his family, everything, and that no one was going to take it away from him. The relief and joy John was feeling shone through his eyes, as he looked at his Captain.

Gideon nodded. "That's correct. You now have the same rights as every other person in this room." He looked across at Boss Bitch and smiled maliciously, "Oh, sorry. The same rights as every 'mundane' in this room." He could see she didn't like his knowledge of that term any more than she'd liked him knowing her name. [Tough shit.]

The Captain turned back to John and looked at him carefully, willing John to trust him. "Lieutenant, will you agree to this gentleman," he gestured at the elderly Jones, "performing a surface scan, while I ask you some questions? Just enough for him to be able to verify the truthfulness of your answers?"

John looked puzzled but nodded. Boss Bitch interjected immediately, "This is a farce! Catches won't be able to carry out the scan, the block is still in place!"

Gideon turned to her and smiled. "I wonder. Perhaps this blocking field that has caused you so much anxiety is less effective than you think, Ms. Jones. Perhaps it doesn't interfere, when the intentions of the telepath carrying out the scan are honorable. Of course, *you'll* never know, will you?" His emphasis made his meaning clear. Boss Bitch was incapable of an honorable action.

The Captain turned back to Catches and asked, "Are you willing to give it a try, Mr. Jones?"

Catches nodded his acquiescence, and Gideon turned to John. "I have three questions for you, Lieutenant. First question." He paused, glancing at Catches, who nodded. "Have you ever carried out any intentional telepathic scans without the consent of the person being scanned?"

John shook his head, answering without hesitation. "No, Sir. Never."

Gideon looked at Catches, who nodded, saying, "I have no idea why I can suddenly scan him, but I can. He's telling the truth."

The Captain maintained his poker face. Lily had obviously caught on to what he'd wanted to do, and lifted the block. He turned back to John. "Have you ever brought any technology onto this ship, which could create the telepathic block that has existed here?"

John shook his head again. "No, Sir" Again, Catches confirmed the veracity of John's answer.

"Last question, John. When the first Mr. Jones tried to scan you and failed, did you expect him to fail?"

John shook his head vehemently. "Absolutely not! I expected him to be able to read me completely!"

Gideon turned to Catches and raised an eyebrow in enquiry. The elderly telepath smiled and nodded. "All completely true, Captain. I think we have all seen and heard enou..."

He was interrupted by a shriek from Boss Bitch, who lunged across the room, trying to get to John, screaming, "No! He's a traitor! He's betrayed us all, he has to be stopped, to be punished, before..."

Catches moved to intercept her with a speed surprising in someone of his age. "Stop!" His hand lashed out and his fingers splayed across Boss Bitch's face, pushing her backwards. Gideon heard John grunt softly and spun around to see if his First Officer had been harmed, then he heard a thump behind him. Spinning back, he saw Boss Bitch's body hit the deck.

The elderly telepath stood above her, staring down impassively, before he turned to Gideon. "She attempted a deep scan. She was trying to pull your Lieutenant's mind apart. It was an unprovoked and unwarranted attack, and my colleagues witnessed it."

The two other Joneses looked white and shaken, but both nodded. Snoopy stuttered, "She will have to be removed from her position. She..." he swallowed, looked warily at Catches, then continued, "The force you used to stop her may have damaged her beyond recovery. She may never be *able* to carry out her duties again."

Catches nodded sadly. "It was unfortunate but necessary. Remove her."

Gideon watched, with quiet satisfaction, as Boss Bitch was carried from the conference room by her two younger colleagues. He turned back to John, to see that Luke and Lily had moved to his side, and were holding him closely. John's face was white and strained.

"John, are you OK?" Gideon cursed himself. If his plan had backfired and harmed John in any way, he'd never forgive himself.

John shook his head and managed a wobbly smile. "It's OK, Captain. The block snapped back into place before she could do any damage." The slight pressure of John's hand around Lily's waist was almost imperceptible, and Gideon's body shielded the movement from Catches' sight.

The Captain turned back to Catches, who was the only Jones remaining in the room. Removing the data crystal from the slot, Gideon passed it back to the telepath. "You'll need this for your report. When you've done with it, and the other crystal with Ms. Jones' orders, you might like to insert them into whichever of Ms. Jones' orifices you think would cause her the most discomfort."

Catches snorted in amusement and took the crystals, bowing slightly to Gideon and glancing around the room at the other witnesses. He smiled softly, saying, "There's one thing you said that I would have to disagree with, Captain." Gideon raised an enquiring eyebrow, and the telepath continued, "You said that Lt. Matheson was a role model showing how telepaths and 'normals' could live together, but I don't think that anyone could describe this young lady as 'normal'." He moved forward and leaned down to take Lily's hand in his, bending to kiss it gently. "I think she is quite extraordinary, and I suspect the other ladies are the same."

The older man straightened and released Lily's hand. "Captain, you and your First Officer are fortunate men. Hold onto that good fortune, treasure it and cherish it. Don't let anyone take it away from you."

Gideon wondered just how much Catches had guessed about what had been going on, but all doubts were removed with the telepath's words as he left the conference room. "I would have been interested in the Lieutenant's response if you had phrased your second question a little differently, Captain. If you had asked 'Have you ever brought any *thing or being* onto this ship, which could create the telepathic block that has existed here?' I wonder what the answer would have been?"

The doors slid shut on Catches last words, and Gideon started to laugh. "The old fox knew exactly what was going on here, but he let us get away with it. I wonder why?"

Lily's voice came from behind him, and he turned to look at her. "I think I know the answer to that, Matthew. He once said to me '*Everybody deserves a fair chance to live the life they want to live.*' I think he just gave us our fair chance."

Demon watched as Lily threw herself into Matthew's arms, hugging him tightly and thanking him. John and Luke's thanks were less demonstrative, but no less sincere. Matthew shrugged, saying it was just luck the orders had come through when they did, and shooed them out of the conference room. Angel followed, nodding coolly at the Captain as she went. Demon sighed, wondering if her sister and her husband would ever get along better. As the doors closed behind Angel, she pushed all such thoughts out of her mind, and smiled as Matthew turned to look at her.

Without speaking, Demon flowed into Matthew's arms, lifting her arms around his neck, and pulling his head down into a passionate kiss. She ran her hands through his hair, her tongue along his lips, and into his mouth, darting in, touching his tongue, then retreating, playing with him, arousing him, until finally Matthew broke for air.

"Whoa! What brought that on?! If you carry on like that, I'll end up taking you on the conference room table." Matthew grinned as he held Demon close, playing with her hair as it fell around her shoulders.

"I love you, Matthew Gideon. You are a good man and a good friend. You are also married to an empath who can tell when you're lying, so don't even try to pretend that those letters from the Senate

Committee and the President's Office weren't your doing. You may fool the others--although I doubt if John believed a word of it--but you can't fool me." Demon gazed into the warm hazel depths of her husband's eyes and allowed a small part of her love for him to escape her control, sweeping over him like a wave of warmth and happiness.

Matthew smiled and lifted his hand to Demon's face. She turned her head to lean against his palm, closing her eyes in pleasure at his touch. As his thumb caressed her cheekbone, Demon heard him whisper, "I love you too, Deborah Gideon. Do you have any idea how much I like the sound of that? Deborah Gideon. It brings out all the macho possessiveness in me, telling the world that you're *mine*."

Demon felt his hand move to her chin, and he lifted her face and kissed her again. She could feel all his love and passion for her in that kiss, and her knees went weak at the sensations running through her body. After a few moments, Matthew pulled back again, and Demon opened her eyes to find him smiling at her. "OK, so you caught me. I might have had something to do with those letters."

Lifting her hand to smooth back Matthew's hair, where she had ruffled it earlier, Demon asked, "So is this what you were waiting for? What you said would only take a few more days?" Matthew nodded, taking a strand of her hair and winding it around his finger as he continued to smile, but said nothing.

"So how did you swing it? I can understand how you got the President's Office to issue the second letter, but how did you get the Senate Committee to change its previous ruling?"

Matthew took her hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing it gently, before he said, "Would you believe my natural charm?" When Demon laughed, he smiled back. "Oh well, it was worth a try. OK, the truth is, I know one of the Senators on that Committee pretty well. We go back a few years, and we've spent a lot of nights around a card table from each other."

Demon looked skeptical. "And this old gambling buddy of yours was willing to turn a Senate Committee's orders upside down, just because you asked him to? Pull the other one, Matthew! It has bells on it."

Matthew's smile became lascivious as he ran a hand over Demon's butt and down her thigh. "Now there's an invitation I can't refuse. Just where do you keep those bells, Mrs. Gideon? I think I'd better do a strip search to find them."

Demon swatted at him, but didn't interfere with what his hands were doing; she was enjoying it far too much. She caught her breath as he slipped his hand under her skirt and ran it up the inside of her thigh, then she asked, a little breathlessly, "Please, Matthew? Pretty please? Tell me how you did it."

Matthew laughed and leaned forward to kiss her nose, saying, "And you call me nosy? Well, OK. Come sit on my knee little girl, and I'll tell you a story." He backed into a chair, pulling Demon down with him, until she sat facing him, straddling his hips. Demon wiggled her pelvis, rubbing herself against him, until Matthew closed his eyes and groaned. "Don't distract me."

Demon sat still, leaning forward to kiss him gently, then said, "So tell me."

Matthew sighed as he smiled up at her. "I had something of his that he wanted back. We did a deal. He pushed the ruling through the Committee and I gave him what he wanted." He went on to tell Demon how years before he had won the Senator's access codes, in a game of sharks. "They've been useful over the years, and I'll miss having them, but it was worth it."

Demon gazed down at him, wondering if it was possible to love anyone more than she loved this man. She allowed Matthew to feel just a part of that love and saw the slow smile spread across his face as he shared her emotions. Leaning forward, she whispered, "You are a very special man, Captain Gideon."

Matthew grinned. "It was pure self-interest. If they'd taken John away and found out half of the stuff we've got up to during these last couple of years, they'd have thrown me into a hole so deep I'd never have hit bottom."

Demon laughed softly. "Bullshit. You're married to an empath, remember?" She smiled lovingly at him, saying, "I don't know what I've done to deserve you, Matthew, but I do love you."

Matthew laughed again, "I remember telling you once that I didn't deserve you, and you said, 'I don't want to be deserved. I just want to be fucked.'"

Demon dropped her head and nibbled on her husband's ear, whispering, "And I remember what you said in reply. You said, 'Now that I can do.' Want to do it here?" She glanced at the conference room table, then back at her husband, her mischievous grin challenging him.

Matthew laughed. "And have the whole crew know what we're up to? Hell no, I prefer to keep some of my vices private. But I'm not on duty for another couple of hours, so we could go back to our quarters and..." he trailed off, grinning up at Demon, his intentions obvious.

"Make like mad bunny rabbits?" Demon grinned back.

"Bunnies on aphrodisiacs." Matthew pushed her off his knees, stood and dragged her out of the conference room.

When he left the conference room with Lily and Luke, John still wasn't able to believe that he'd never have to face the Joneses again. [Is this just a dream? If so, I never want to wake up again. But it has to be real, as I couldn't have imagined this in my wildest dreams!] As soon as they got outside, Luke, Lily and he fell into each other's arms, paying no attention to the crew members nearby, and Lily let him through her telepathic block, so they could share their joy and jubilation mind to mind. The threesome didn't need any words to let each other know how they felt.

Only when Angel cleared her throat did they look up. "I hate to disturb you, but I just wanted you to know that I'm very happy everything ended well." Lily's raven-haired sister smiled at John, but it was such a reluctant smile that instinctively John let go of his partners, and drew Angel into a warm hug. He could feel her stiffen in surprise for a moment, before her arms came around him. He held onto her shoulders, as he stepped back to look into her crystal blue eyes.

"Thank you, Angel, for all your support." John put all his gratitude and happiness into his voice, and was pleased to see Angel's eyes twinkle as she blushed, before she was pulled away by Lily and Luke, who hugged and thanked her.

Angel laughed. "Count me in anytime you need to create some mischief."

January 19th 2270 -- last day of the Jones investigation - roughly 2 hours later

John was slowly making his way to the landing bay, to make sure everything was prepared for the four investigation leaders' departure. Most bloodhounds who had been on the Excalibur that morning had already been shuttled off to B5.

The news of what had happened in the conference room had made its way around the ship in record time. Since then, John had barely been able to go anywhere without someone expressing their relief that the Joneses' investigation was over, and that he didn't have to face the regular Jones' visits anymore. Even those crew members who hadn't had the 'honor' of dealing directly with the telepathic investigators, had expressed their outrage at the charges brought against their First Officer, and the whole investigation. That general anti-Jones sentiment was only dampened slightly when it came to FBI, who had generally been perceived as the least annoying of the telepath watchdogs. Many people had expressed a certain respect for the older man, especially since he had prevented Boss Bitch from harming John.

The young Lieutenant frowned as he remembered Ines' callous attack. Catches' intervention, when she had tried to deep scan John, had been so forceful that she was still comatose. Luke and a visibly shaken Frog Boy had checked her over, and done what they could to stabilize her for the trip, which wasn't a lot, as the problem was psychic, not physical. John found himself wondering if even the specialists back on Earth could help her.

For a moment, he couldn't help feeling a certain cold satisfaction about what had happened to Ines, but a stab of guilt subdued it immediately. [There is nothing to feel good about. She may be a vegetable for the rest of her life. Nothing I would wish on anyone, not even her.] He sighed mentally. [She had it coming, I guess.]

John was so deep in thought that he was startled to suddenly find G'Tan walking alongside him.

"Lieutenant," the leader of the Narn Marines rumbled in his deep voice, "I am very pleased to hear that you were exonerated."

"Thank you, G'Tan."

John said that with a smile, raising his eyebrows in amused wonder, as the Narn continued, "There is one regret I have, though."

"And that would be?"

"That I couldn't personally contribute to making the Joneses' stay on the Excalibur as unpleasant as possible," G'Tan growled, a malicious grin on his face.

John laughed and stopped, facing him. "From what Lily told me about that knife throwing practice, you contributed quite a bit. Let's be happy that no more contributions were necessary."

G'Tan chuckled and nodded, saluting smartly before walking back the way they had come.

When John entered the landing bay, he almost ran into his 'old friend', Snoopy, who was just leaving. [I hope this won't become a habit!] Telling himself he'd soon be rid of the Joneses for good, John

nodded at Snoopy and started to walk past him.

"Lieutenant?"

[Not again!] John stopped, taking a deep breath before turning around to face the blond Jones, meeting his eyes coolly.

"A minute of your time, please." Snoopy gestured for John to follow him to a quiet corner, out of earshot of the various crew members working nearby. John joined him, wondering what this was about. Snoopy started speaking softly. "I won't keep you from your work for too long, but there is one thing I wanted to say to you before I leave, Lieutenant Matheson."

Before John could say anything, Mr. Jones continued quickly, "While on this ship, I found that your family and friends--the whole crew of the Excalibur, in fact--showed an unexpected and unprecedented loyalty to you, even though they are all 'mundanes'. Such loyalty doesn't come undeserved." Jones briefly pressed his lips together, before continuing, "You were right, I *am* envious. And now it's time for me to finish packing. Safe winds and calm seas, Lieutenant." Giving John a crooked smile, he nodded politely, then turned on his heels and strode out of the landing bay, leaving John to stare after him in amazement.

January 19th 2270 -- last day of the Jones investigation - almost noon

Once again, the Excalibur's command crew and John's complete extended family were gathered in the landing bay. The scene was almost the same as when the Joneses had arrived, but the mood was very different to what it had been six days before. Gideon could almost feel it in the air; a lightheartedness and joy that seemed to permeate everything. He saw Lily smile up at John as she hooked her arm into his, and he smiled back, while gently rocking Dasha in his sling. Luke, who stood on John's other side carrying Faylinn, put his arm around John's shoulders, squeezing the telepath to his side.

Hearing the door open, Gideon turned and watched as two 'bloodhounds' carried the stretcher on which Boss Bitch lay, closely followed by Snoopy and Frog Boy. [I will never be able to think of these guys as anything but those names, thanks to my beloved wife!] The Captain kept a poker face, although inwardly amused at the identifiers. FBI had left the Excalibur a short while before, taking copies of the data crystals proving that John Matheson was no longer subject to the rules of the Bureau of Telepath Integration.

His departure had been cordial, with Lily hugging him, and FBI bending to tickle Dasha and Faylinn under their chins before he left, making the twins giggle. Marcus hadn't been so amenable to petting, getting a sudden attack of shyness, and tucking his head into his mother's shoulder. Gideon had stroked his son's golden curls and laughed, "He takes after his mother. Never does what you want," which had earned him a gentle thump on the arm.

Glancing down at the stretcher, the Captain could see that Boss Bitch's face was ashen, her eyes closed and she seemed to be barely breathing. Luke had checked her over earlier, and had advised Gideon that there was nothing physically wrong with her. There were no signs of any material brain damage. Whatever FBI had done when he stopped Boss Bitch had been on a psychic level, and had driven the female telepath into a coma of some kind. What Luke didn't know was when or if she would ever come out of it. Gideon found that he didn't really care.

He watched as the 'bloodhounds' carried the stretcher up to the waiting shuttle, then turned to Snoopy and Frog Boy, who had paused at the foot of the ramp. Snoopy turned to Gideon and lifted his hand to his brow in a half salute, as he said, "It seems that any telepaths coming aboard the Excalibur had better stay on the right side of the Captain and his family." He gestured to the shuttle inside which Boss Bitch had disappeared.

Gideon nodded. "I'm glad to hear that you've learned something from your visits, Mr. Jones. Please pass that lesson on to your superiors. All telepaths are welcome on board my ship. All telepaths who are willing to work with 'mundanes' on an equal basis, that is. Those who don't discriminate and don't wish to be discriminated against. There are no special rules on the Excalibur, and there never will be, as long as I'm in command. Just the rule of law and the rule of civilized behavior. Oh, and the rule of the Captain. That's the most important one." His smile was pure evil, and he heard Deborah snort softly behind him.

Snoopy nodded, then turned on his heel and walked up the shuttle ramp.

Lily watched Snoopy and Frog Boy, as they walked to the shuttle, pausing at the foot of the ramp. While the blond Jones seemed to have more or less recovered from the morning's events, his younger colleague was still pale and withdrawn, obviously still shaken. [Good!]

When Snoopy walked up the ramp, Frog Boy hesitated, his eyes glued to Lily's tight fitting, low cut bodice, clearly displayed as she had handed the twins to their fathers to look after. It seemed as if he wanted to say something, but then the French telepath shook his head almost imperceptibly, and turned to follow his colleague.

Even though he hadn't met her gaze, Lily had been able to see the confusion in his eyes. She frowned, then stepped forward and said softly, "Monsieur?"

Frog Boy stopped and gave her a tiny smile. "Mademoiselle?"

Lily looked at him sincerely. "I hope you learned a lesson from this. It would be a shame if you ended up like Ines. It's not too late to change."

Frog Boy blinked, and gave her a long, pensive look. Lily lifted her hand as he went to speak, silencing him, then stood on her toes and whispered into his ear. Frog Boy flushed scarlet and fled up the ramp to the shuttle.

Gideon watched as the shuttle door closed, then led his friends and family from the landing bay. They all stood at the window, watching the shuttle lift and exit. He turned as he heard Angel ask Lily, "What did you whisper to Frog Boy, Lily? He went an amazing shade of red."

Lily's smile was even more evil than Gideon's had been. "I told him that some women could resist his charms, and he'd better try a technique that involves less slime. I'm not a snail, after all."

January 20th 2270

Gideon watched warily, as Deborah dressed Marcus. "Are you sure taking him over to B5 is a good idea? It's not a particularly baby friendly place, you know."

Deborah spoke as she finished fastening Marcus' dungarees. "He's got a bit of a snuffle, and he isn't feeling very happy right now. I don't want to leave him when he's like this. He tends to get grouchy with anyone else." She looked up and smiled. "A grouchy Marcus can be a bit of a handful. He takes after his parents, you know, and neither of them are renowned for their patience and tolerance when in a bad mood."

Lifting the baby into the air, Deborah smiled up at him, and Gideon could feel the wave of love and happiness she projected, trying to improve her son's temper. Gideon laughed and reached out to take Marcus from her. The baby snuggled into his father's shoulder, making contented little snuffling noises. Marcus liked nothing more than a cuddle from the Captain. [Just like his mother,] Gideon thought, reaching out to caress his wife's face, as she stood watching the men in her life.

Deborah was wearing a tight, black, sleeveless sweater, over a straight, knee length skirt. While the outfit wasn't particularly revealing, it did nothing to hide her spectacular figure. Her hair was tied back loosely into a ponytail, secured by a chiffon scarf that made the Captain smile. He would never forget the time Deborah had blindfolded him with that scarf, nor what had followed. She smiled gently at him and reached out to stroke her son's golden curls.

"Shall we go? I've heard so much about Babylon 5. I'm dying to see it for myself."

Gideon resigned himself to the inevitable. He only hoped that Elizabeth Lochley would be otherwise occupied on station business, and that they wouldn't bump into her. Telling himself that there were half a million people on B5, so the chances of him meeting any one of them in particular were miniscule, the Captain smiled at his wife and said, "Let's go."

The Zocalo was as crowded as ever, with people surging in and out of the shops and bars running either side of the central corridor, and gathering around the various market stalls, inspecting what was on sale.

Having left Lily, Luke and John in one of the shops, Gideon pushed his way through the throng, moving slightly ahead of Deborah, who carried Marcus in a sling in front of her. The Captain had offered to carry Marcus in his usual backpack carrier, but Deborah had refused. She was concerned that Marcus might find the crowds disturbing at first, so said it would be better if she carried him in front of her, where she could see him and keep contact with him. So far, Marcus had shown nothing but interest in what was going on around him. The crowds hadn't unsettled him at all. His hazel eyes were round as saucers, as he gazed around him, apparently taking it all in and enjoying himself.

The sight of a stand crowded with teddy bears attracted the baby's attention, and he leaned in that direction, reaching out toward the stall, yelling, "Eh! Eh! Eh!" The Captain had learned that this was Marcus' way of saying 'Ted' and Deborah soon confirmed this.

"He thinks it's Half-Ted and he wants to play."

They moved over to the market stall, and Marcus immediately stretched out his hand, trying to grab one of the bears. Deborah was just telling him not to touch, when Gideon heard a voice behind him.

"You're a little old for teddy bears, aren't you, Matthew?" It was Elizabeth.

Gideon closed his eyes and wondered what he'd done to piss off every god in the Centauri pantheon, as it was only through the full weight of their cumulative displeasure that he could explain the situation in which he now found himself. Next to him, still facing the stall, stood his wife, holding their son in front of her, where he was still invisible to Gideon's ex-mistress, standing behind them both. But as soon as Deborah turned around, Elizabeth would find out that Gideon hadn't been entirely forthcoming about his family. There was one small member of that family who he'd neglected to mention. The Captain had no doubt that Marcus' small size and the scale of Elizabeth's annoyance would bear very little relation to each other.

He took a deep breath, plastered his most ingratiating smile on his face and turned, saying, "Hello, Elizabeth. What a pleasant surprise." Elizabeth was in uniform, hair loose around her shoulders, smiling at him. Before Deborah could make any comments about his nose growing, Gideon hurried on, "Let me introduce you to my wife, Deborah." Deborah started to turn to face the Captain of B5 and Gideon hurried on, "I may be too old for the bears, but this little one isn't. This is Marcus. My son."

There was no other way to say it, no easier way to break the news to Elizabeth. Gideon now wished he'd had the sense to call on ahead and let her know about Marcus. Too late now. He just had to trust both women to behave in a civilized manner. He knew that Deborah would never create a scene in public, [No, she'll just crucify me later, in private!] but he wasn't so sure about Elizabeth. She was quite capable of punching Gideon's lights out, in the middle of the Zocalo.

He held his breath and watched both women closely, glancing nervously from one to the other. Deborah reacted first. "Hello, Captain Lochley. I'm so pleased to meet you at last. Matthew has told me how much he admires you."

Gideon tried not to react, but a shiver ran down his spine. [What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Admires? Physically? Intellectually? Professionally? What the hell is she getting at?] He waited for Elizabeth's response, wishing that the floor beneath him would open up and drop him into space. The minor problem of not being able to breathe out there seemed irrelevant compared to the potential disaster in front of him. Asphyxiation was far preferable to getting caught between these two women.

Elizabeth smiled back. "The pleasure is mutual. Although this little one is a bit of a surprise." She leaned forward and smiled at Marcus, who was looking up at her, curiously. The baby reached out, trying to grasp a lock of Elizabeth's hair that had fallen forward, as she'd leaned toward him.

Deborah apologized and intercepted Marcus' hand. "I'm sorry. He's at the stage where he wants to touch everything, and he particularly likes long hair."

Gideon hoped Deborah didn't hear Elizabeth's murmured, "Takes after his father then," but knew it was unlikely he could be so lucky. [I'm going to be paying for this for *years*!]

Deborah laughed. "Oh, he takes after his father in a lot of ways. Marcus not only loves long hair, he also flirts with every woman he meets, and he's fixated on their breasts. Does that sound like anyone you know?"

Elizabeth blinked several times, then burst out laughing. She turned to Gideon and grinned. "Matthew,

you should have brought your wife here long ago." Turning back to Deborah, she said, "Would you like to see some more of B5? It's an amazing place and there are lots of things to see. I can show you where the best shops are and there's a great café just along here. They have the most divine chocolate éclairs, and most of the time I avoid the place like the plague, but this is a special occasion, so let's indulge ourselves."

The two women started to walk away together, leaving Gideon standing, open-mouthed, staring after them. After a few steps, Deborah paused, turned to look over her shoulder at her husband, and winked. She then turned back and walked away, side by side with Elizabeth, chatting as if they'd known each other for years.

Gideon stood and watched them leave, wondering if he'd ever dare go home again.

Lily felt like a small child, as she took in her surroundings, wide-eyed and full of excitement and wonder--just like Faylinn and Dasha. John and Luke were carrying the twins in slings in front of them. This gave them a better view of everything, and avoided them being crushed in the crowd, which would have been more likely to happen at Lily's level. On her own, the tiny redhead was able to slip between other people effortlessly.

Luke and John had been slightly concerned if she would be all right. They knew that just like her sisters, she wasn't used to such masses of people, and since she was so tiny, the redhead could easily get lost or carried away by the crowd.

Lily had smiled at them. "If you lose me, and suddenly hear someone cry out, that's probably where I am." When she'd caught her partners' concerned looks, she'd giggled. "I wasn't talking about me crying out--I tend to elbow, kick, claw, and bite my way out of confinement."

Lily couldn't remember when she had last been in such a crowded place, or if she ever had. The Zocalo had an incredible range of shops, restaurants and bars run by humans and aliens. [Too bad Angel couldn't come with us. I know she'd have loved the shops,] Lily thought sadly. But she understood that Babylon 5 still held too many memories for her sister, memories of the months she had lived here with Lucas. Besides, it was better not to risk a meeting with Captain Lochley, as she may have recognized Angel.

Early on, Lily had discovered a shop with fine fabrics, and warned the others, "This might take a while." So Demon, Matthew and Marcus had gone on, after the tall blonde had assured them all that if Lily said it could take a while, it would take a *long* while.

Lily smiled to herself. Luke and John had shown amazing patience, while she had chosen all kinds of fabrics for several dresses, skirts, shirts, pants, coats, and assorted other clothes. When they had finally left the shop, John had commented that she could dress the whole extended family for a year with what she'd bought. Fortunately, they didn't have to carry it all around, as the shop owner had agreed to have everything delivered to the Excalibur within an hour.

Since then, Lily had done her best not to go into too many shops, although the temptation was great. She wasn't really the endless shopping spree type, but the selection there was just so incredible, and a lot of it was completely new to a 20th century girl.

They were already on their way back to the meeting point John and Matthew had agreed upon, when

something in a shop window they were walking past caught Lily's eye, stopping her short. A moment later, she rushed forward, almost pressing her face to the glass, as she stared open-mouthed at the statue on display in front of her, barely noticing the other items around it. It was a depiction of the Goddess as a tree, the most beautiful and elegant version of this motif Lily had ever seen. About half a meter high, the woman's shapely, dark brown painted body formed the trunk, her arms and fingers the branches and twigs, and her green hair/leaves flaring out into a full tree top.

"Like it?" John's voice brought her back to the here and now, and she gave him a scandalized look.

"*Like* it? I LOVE it! It's gorgeous, it's perfect, it's so..." A little whimpering sound escaped her, and after another admiring look, she rushed towards the shop's door.

"NO!" Again Lily was stopped short, but not by fascination. [Oh please, this can't be true! Not when I found something so perfect!]

"What is it?" Luke asked when he and John had caught up with her.

Wordlessly, Lily pointed at the note in the closed door: *Be right back*.

"Do we have time?" she asked, looking up at John, before throwing another longing look at the statue.

"I'm afraid not, Lily. We can just about make it, if we hurry up, but..."

"Just one minute? Please?" She turned and looked up at him pleadingly.

"I'm sorry, Lily, we really have to go now." John smiled gently, stroking her cheek. "If the shop had been open I'd have said yes, as I can see this statue seems to mean a lot to you, but we just don't have the time to wait."

Lily sighed, feeling as if her heart would break as she looked at the statue again. "I know, but it's... I just feel like it's been waiting here for me!"

"You might find another one somewhere, or it might still be here the next time we come to B5," Luke said, hugging her against his side and smiling down at her. "But now it's time to go home. And I think someone is getting hungry."

The redhead's eyes followed his look down to Faylinn, who was sucking on her index finger, which was usually a first sign of hunger. Lily knew that the Excalibur had to leave soon, and further delays would not be appreciated by Sheridan. She couldn't and wouldn't let Matthew and John get into trouble because of her. After taking a deep breath, Lily smiled bravely. "OK, let's go home." She hooked her arms into John's and Luke's and let them lead her away, throwing a last longing look back at the tree goddess statue.

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Lily peeked into the bedroom, where they had tucked in Marcus, Faylinn and Dasha, a big, soft toy snake draped around them so they couldn't fall off the bed. The three were still awake and immersed in the quiet babbling that took the place of conversation for small babies, but Lily could feel through the

link that they'd soon fall asleep. Smiling, she silently slipped out again, into the living room, where the grownups were assembled around the dining table. It was one week to the day since the Joneses had left, so Lily, John, and Luke had decided to invite their extended family for a celebration dinner. Trace had been unavailable for babysitting due to a hot date with a new crew member, so they had decided to tuck their children in together for a few hours.

When Lily slipped into her chair between Luke and Matthew, the Captain was just saying, "I won't be disappointed if I never see the sorry face of a Ms. or Mr. Jones again in my life. This investigation was more than enough for one lifetime."

Smiling at John, who sat opposite her at the other end of the oval table, Lily said, "Well, you may have to get used to one of them visiting from time to time, Matthew."

Fork in hand, Gideon leaned forward, frowning at her. "What do you mean?"

John chuckled. "Don't worry. Alden Catches called earlier to let me know that this whole incident would be deleted from my file." His eyes were sparkling as he continued, to the approving murmurs and nods from Gideon, Demon and Angel, "And we took the liberty of inviting him to visit whenever he wants to." He smiled at Luke and Lily.

Gideon's frown almost disappeared when he said after a moment, "As long as you're sure he's harmless. As I told Snoopy, anyone who follows the Captain's rules is welcome on this ship."

"I'm sure Alden will, if only so he'll be able to visit our children again. They seem to have made quite an impression. They must have inherited their mother's charm." Luke reached out to take Lily's right hand in his left, lifting it to his lips and kissing it lightly.



"Don't tell me you thought the Joneses would be able to resist the Witches' charm?" Demon inserted, her golden brown eyes glittering with amusement, as she looked at Luke.

Angel snorted a laugh from her place between Luke and John. "Not a snowball's chance in hell!"

Gideon lifted his glass as he looked at Lily. "'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on." His gaze wandered from the tiny redhead to each of her sisters as he added with a smile, "A toast to the most beautiful and cunning women in the universe, who are humbling us by their presence at this table."

"To beauty and cunning," Luke added, "May both never fade in the Witches."

"As long as we profit, at least," John muttered under his breath, grinning as the sisters loudly protested his suggestion that the men wouldn't always profit from their beauty and cunning. "OK, OK--Thank you, all of you." His eyes roamed over the faces of the people seated around the table, his gratitude obvious in his eyes and voice. "I don't know what I'd have done without you." John lifted his glass high. "To our family."

John's toast was repeated fivefold.

Demon smiled at Angel over the edge of her glass, as she took a sip of champagne. She could see that her raven-haired sister shared in the generally relaxed and joyous mood. [No wonder, John and Luke are spoiling her rotten.] Demon had noticed that when Angel had arrived, Lily's partners had subtly maneuvered her to sit between them, and had been very attentive to her during the course of the dinner. Angel was apparently lapping it all up, allowing herself to enjoy the attention she was getting. [That's a good sign. Her wounds will take a long time to heal, but it's a start.]

Demon was distracted from her thoughts when John spoke.

"Talking about beautiful..." Setting his glass down, the young telepath pointedly looked at Gideon. "That shirt is a definite improvement on some of the others I've seen you wear, Matthew."

Matthew opened his mouth to reply, but Demon cut in, "I'm glad you said that, John. Matthew says I'm the only one who thinks he has terrible taste in shirts."

"Oh no, he has some real shockers. Have you seen that green flowery thing he calls a beach shirt?"

"Seen it, hated it, destroyed it. Worry not, John, you'll never have to endure the sight of that shirt again."

John heaved a sigh of relief, as Matthew glared at each of them in turn. "Thanks heavens for that. Now tell me that you've got rid of that godawful brown patterned thing he loves so much, and you'll make my evening complete."

Demon smiled. "Gone for rags, John. You'll never see *that* thing again, either!"

Angel inserted in a small voice, "But I liked those shirts!"

John and Luke turned to stare at the raven-haired witch sitting between them, both men looking about ready to kick her under the table, while Demon and Lily both frantically sent through the link, *[[Shut up! Don't encourage him! He'll just go out and buy more of those awful things!]]*

The corners of Angel's mouth twitched ever so slightly as she sent back, *[[Oh, he won't have to go and buy any himself...]]*

Unaware of the mental conversation between the sisters, Matthew leaned forward and thumped the table. "Dammit, so did I! Some people not very far from here are going to find themselves using the rags that were once my favorite shirts to clean out the bullet car tubes!"

Demon leaned towards Matthew and slid her hand between his legs, caressing his balls gently, causing him to open his eyes rather wide. She kissed his ear, then whispered, "I'll make it up to you later, darling, I promise. You can tear my shirt off, then get out that little whip you got me for Christmas and..."

Gideon glared around the table, well aware that his wife would know he was bluffing, but trusting her

to play along. He turned a particularly ferocious gaze on John, narrowing his eyes as he said quietly, "I'll deal with Deborah when we get back to our rooms, but someone around here is looking for some particularly nasty duties in the next few days."

The table went silent, and the others looked at him warily. They weren't quite sure if he was joking or not. Angel looked particularly wary, but then she'd done her best to avoid speaking to Gideon all through dinner, aided and abetted by Luke and John, who had been careful to distract her. For a moment, the Captain wondered whether he and his wife's sister would ever be able to get along easily together. Pushing those thoughts aside, he turned his attention back to his victim, preparing himself for play.

"I've had a complaint that there's an odd smell coming from the Pak'ma'ra quarters, Lieutenant. Perhaps I should send you to investigate that one personally." He kept his expression deadpan, telling himself he shouldn't torment his XO so much, but then again...[This should teach him to appreciate my taste in shirts!]

John tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace, so Gideon continued, "Or perhaps I should send you to track down that smell I picked up in the bullet car tubes. Did I tell you it was back?"

By now a faint film of sweat had appeared across John's forehead, and it was obvious that the telepath was wondering whether he'd gone too far, crossing an invisible boundary and really pissing off his CO.

Gideon allowed malicious pleasure to seep into his voice as he said, "But that would be such a shame. If you have to start clambering around the access tubes, you'll get that nice, white shirt all dirty, won't you?" He gestured at John's shirt, so white it nearly glowed, so neatly pressed that not a wrinkle could be seen.

John tried another smile, no more successfully than before, as he murmured, "I could always get changed..." before trailing off into silence, as he saw the shark-like grin on his Captain's face.

"Perhaps you should. You know I don't think I like that shirt you're wearing. It's boring. Monochromatic. Dull. It needs livening up a little. Maybe a good crawl through the access tubes is just what it needs. Or maybe..." Gideon paused, leaning back in his seat and digging into his pocket with his free hand. Clenching his fist tightly around what he had in there, he placed his hand on the table. "Maybe you could decorate it with this."

Opening his fist, Gideon displayed the band of metal that rested there. Around ten centimeters long, by one wide, it was solid gold in color. The Captain watched his XO carefully, seeing the sharp intake of breath, as John registered what Gideon was holding out to him. John's eyes flicked from the golden bar, up to Gideon's eyes and back again.

John's mouth opened, then closed. He licked his lips, opened his mouth again and a strangled noise emerged. He cleared his throat and tried again. "That's a command stat bar."

Gideon nodded. "That's very good, Commander. I'm glad you've studied Earthforce rank symbols."

John's mouth opened again, but this time no sound emerged. Gideon hadn't enjoyed himself quite this much since--well, since he'd got out of bed that morning, but that was an entirely different kind of enjoyment.

Luke finally came to John's rescue. "Did you just say 'Commander'? As in Commander John Matheson?"

Gideon nodded and smiled, putting the stat bar on the table and pushing it toward his XO. "That is, if John wants it. At the moment, he doesn't look too sure."

John's right hand moved like lightning, grabbing the stat bar and clutching it tightly. He finally managed to choke out, "Oh I do! I mean, yes, Sir! I mean, thank you, Sir! I mean..." He ran out of words, but Gideon didn't need to hear them. The look on John's face was enough. His expression was one of pure astonishment and joy.

Then the room erupted, as everyone around the table rushed to congratulate John. Lily and Angel leaped from their chairs and both landed on him together, pushing his chair over backwards, all three of them landing in a heap. Luke went to try and unscramble his lover from the two women attacking him, but the doctor was laughing helplessly at the sight of John being kissed madly by the two sisters.

Gideon watched, smiling at the effect he'd created, well pleased with himself. He became aware of his wife's hand sliding back up his leg, and her hand gently caressing him again. She leaned across and whispered, "I love you, Matthew Gideon. 'Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit, Do give thee five-fold blazon.' Let's go back to our quarters, and I can show you just how much I appreciate you."

Gideon slid his hand over hers, pulling it above the table, and lifting it to his lips. He whispered back, "And I love you, too. 'With adorations, with fertile tears, With groans that thunder love, with sighs of fire.' Or something like that."

Deborah laughed and grasped his hand tightly, while the two of them watched the rough and tumble on the other side of the room.

After a few moments, Gideon turned and said quietly, "Get you to bed on the instant; I will be returned forthwith;"

Deborah laughed again softly, her eyes filled with passion, as she replied, "I will, my lord."

It was long past midnight, when the door closed behind Angel. She had stayed and watched 'Much Ado About Nothing' with John, Lily and Luke, after Demon and Matthew had left with Marcus. Luke had to suppress a grin, as there was no doubt why the Captain and his wife had given the movie a miss. [Good thing we arranged for everybody to have tomorrow off,] Luke thought, [This way no one will need to worry about having to get up early.]

Lily turned and looked up at John, a dazzling smile on her lips. "So how do you feel-- Commander?"

John took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I don't know. Somehow, I still don't quite believe it's true." He smiled. "It will take some getting used to. I probably won't react the first few times someone calls me 'Commander'."

Luke hugged him, ruffling his hair. "Then we should train you. Congratulations, Commander." He kissed his partner softly, only breaking away when Lily protested.

"Hey, my turn now!" She was pouting when Luke turned his head to look at her.

Luke grinned and stepped aside, letting go of John with his left arm, so their Fire-Lily could enter the gap. He watched as she flowed against John, smiling, her arms snaking around his neck before pulling his head down into a deep kiss.

When they finally came up for air, Lily drew Luke into their embrace so they stood in a triangle. "Any ideas how to properly celebrate this event?" Lily's tone was deceptively casual, but Luke recognized the look in her eyes.

And apparently, so did John, who smiled down at her. "I don't know, but you look as if you do."

"Well... Since you've just been promoted to *Commander*, I thought you could show us just how commanding you can be?" Lily lightly traced her fingernails up and down his biceps, batting her eyelashes at John.

"Oooh, sounds delightful," Luke murmured, "I'm certainly up for it."

"I'll make sure you will be."

The combination of John's low voice, and his promising, lascivious smile, made Luke's cock twitch. "You always do."

John Matheson laid in bed awake, listening to the sweet sound of his lovers' and children's calm breathing. Lily, Luke, and he had been too exhausted, after a long session of rough-and-tumble sex in the living room, to take the twins to their own bedroom. So Faylinn and Dasha were now sleeping either side of John, with Lily and Luke framing them. The toy snake that had guarded the twins and Marcus during dinner was curled up on top of the sheets. [At least this one doesn't bite,] John thought with amusement. He was just waiting for the day when Lily added a real snake to her growing collection.

Strangely enough, John still felt wide awake, despite his earlier exhaustion. But then this evening had been an exciting one in more than one sense. The dinner had been wonderful, and Matthew's revelation of his promotion to Commander had just made it perfect.

John shook his head as he remembered the typical Gideon fashion in which his CO had presented the Command stat bar to him, but he wouldn't want his Captain and friend to change one bit. He may not have admitted it when John had asked him privately, but John knew that Matthew had done something to ensure the new ISA regulations and the Senate Committee for Metasensory Abilities' orders were put into effect when they were.

[Without his support and help against the Joneses, I may be in Ines' place now, with Lily, her sisters and the children taken away to some ultra-secret facility for 'testing'. Sure, Matthew's wife and son were also at risk, but I know that he would have helped me just the same. I'll never be able to repay him for all he has done for me, since taking me on as an Ensign. But I will keep doing my best for him, always.]

Looking straight up at the ceiling, John was just able to make out the details of Lily's tapestry in the reddish light of hyperspace. A smile spread on John's face. He had closed himself off, thinking he had

to fight the war alone, to protect his family. Deep down, he'd been ashamed, and afraid of their reaction if he'd told them about his failure. [But Lily was right. We did fight like a wolf pack, and that unity made us strong. I should have known to trust in my family and our strength.] He really liked the sound of that. [*My family*. And I will never let anyone take them from me.]

John sighed happily. Suddenly, the future seemed wide open, and while he would still follow the new regulations for telepaths, John knew that no one would ever point their finger at him again, because he was unable to completely block an alien's feelings, while projecting into his mind in defense. [And thinking about blocking, I'll have to start rebuilding my block with Lily's help--but not tonight.]

Closing his eyes, John sent his love to his family, wrapping it around them like a blanket, feeling their response even though they were sleeping. Keeping a light connection to their minds, John let himself drift off, and was soon fast asleep, still smiling.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four B

{[Part 1: Keeping up with the Joneses](#)}