

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

by [The Space Witches](#)



Have the Witches of Eriadne found their match in this woman?

Chapter 1

January 2270

Demon felt the presence behind her as she stood in the kitchen. She smiled, as an arm encircled her waist, while a hand pulled back the hair from her neck, and lips were pressed gently to the side of her face. Her knees trembled and her breathing accelerated, as always happened when her husband touched her.

A deep, soft voice spoke quietly, "Something smells good."

Demon leaned back against Matthew's chest and smiled. "Is that a food something or a me something?"

She heard Matthew's deep chuckle as he pressed his mouth to her neck again. "Well, I meant the food, but now that you mention it," he inhaled deeply, "you smell good enough to eat as well."

Demon laughed and turned in his arms, smiling into his eyes, as she lifted her hand to push back a

lock of his hair that had flopped over his forehead. Dropping her head to Matthew's neck, she breathed deeply, inhaling the smell of his sweat, still fresh from his work-out. "So do you. Maybe you'd better shower before those rampant pheromones overwhelm me, and I throw you on the kitchen counter and ravish you."



Matthew chuckled again and pulled her close, dropping his head to kiss her passionately, finally releasing her mouth to say, "Maybe you'd better hold the ravishing until after lunch. When are our guests arriving?"

Demon smiled and kissed him quickly before replying, "In about half an hour. Plenty of time for you to shower and change. Did you have a good work-out?"

Matthew nodded. He'd decided to spend the morning of one of his rare whole days off in the gym, while Demon prepared lunch for John, Luke, and Lily. He let go of his wife long enough to peer into the salad bowl she'd been filling when he arrived. "Looks good. Was the crèche OK about taking Marcus for the whole day?"

Demon slapped his hand as he tried to steal a piece of tomato. "Yes, so after our guests are gone we have the whole afternoon to ourselves." She watched as Matthew grinned lasciviously at her.

"Oh, good. I wonder what we can do to occupy ourselves?" He reached out and pulled Demon back into his arms, kissing her deeply again.

When they finally broke for breath, Demon pushed him away gently. "Go get cleaned up and dressed, while I lay the table."

Matthew's smile broadened. "Set the table. There's only one thing around here that you're going to be laying, and it ain't the table." After one last kiss, he turned to leave the kitchen, but paused in the doorway. Turning back he asked, "Deborah? Could you do me a favor?"

Demon smiled at him. "Since when have I ever been able to say 'no' to you? What's the favor?"

Matthew's smile faded. "Can you stay open to John at lunch? Tell me how he's feeling? I'm worried about him."

Demon nodded. "Of course I will. Lily's worried too, you know. It's just so unfair..." she trailed off as she felt a surge of guilt and anxiety from her husband.

Matthew frowned deeply. "I know. I've done everything I can, but I'm not sure it's enough, and I know it's not soon enough..." Demon had rushed across the kitchen as he spoke, and she now laid her fingers gently on his lips to interrupt him.

"Stop it. It's not your fault, and you shouldn't feel guilty. No one could be a better friend to John than you are. Stop beating yourself up about it." Demon allowed a small part of her love, trust and confidence in her husband to escape her control and wash over him. She watched as his smile reappeared, and he took her back in his arms.

Matthew kissed her gently. "Start sending some of those feelings over lunch and you'll not only have John feeling great, but you could start a full scale orgy in here. But you could try projecting a little

happiness and confidence John's way. It can't do any harm." He kissed her again, then left to get showered and changed.

Demon watched him leave, silently trying to decide whether she preferred the view when he walked toward her or away from her. She concluded that they were both equally good, before turning to complete the salad. As she put the last vegetables in place, she thought about the lunch ahead. Angel had been invited too, but was on duty in Medbay and had said that she didn't really have time to join them. Demon suspected that her sister was avoiding Matthew. Although the two of them were very polite to each other, they still didn't really get along that well.

Demon sighed, and turned her thoughts to her other sister. Lily was worried sick about John. They all knew what was bothering him, but not *why* it was worrying him so much. He was even blocking Lily and Luke from his thoughts these days. Demon had suggested the lunch as a way of relaxing John a little. She planned to keep up a constant outpouring of happiness and positive thoughts, in an attempt to calm the telepath down. She didn't know if would work, but it couldn't hurt to try.

"Deborah? Where's my brown shirt?" Matthew's voice carried through from the bedroom to the living area, where Demon had just finished setting the table. She froze.

[Shit! Why now? Oh well, it had to happen sometime.]

She walked into the bedroom and the sight that met her eyes, nearly made her knees give way beneath her. Matthew was standing naked in front of the wardrobe, his back to her, pushing aside hangers, looking for the shirt. His long legs, tight butt, muscular back and broad shoulders had Demon almost panting with desire, as she swept her eyes from his feet to his head. In the four months they'd been married, she'd seen him naked every day but the sight still aroused her. She felt her nipples harden, and a wet warmth spread between her legs as she joined him at the wardrobe.

"Which brown shirt?" Demon peered at the clothes on the hangers.

Matthew turned, immediately suspicious. "You know which brown shirt. The brown shirt you hate. The brown shirt you loathe nearly as much as you despise the green flowered beach shirt..." he trailed off as he pushed hangers aside, then continued, "the green flowered beach shirt that is also missing."

Demon tried to project total innocence as she raised her eyebrows. "Really? Oh dear. I wonder if there might have been an accident in the laundry." She went to step back, but before she could move, Matthew spun around and grabbed her arms, pulling her tightly against him.

"An accident? Like the accident we had a couple of years back, when we 'lost' the gray uniforms? I know that sort of accident all too well. Deborah, did you get rid of my shirts? My favorite shirts?" Matthew was peering closely into his wife's eyes.

Demon dropped her gaze and lifted her hand to run her fingers gently through the soft hairs on his chest. She leaned forward to kiss his collarbone and whispered, "You don't need shirts. I much prefer you like this." She moved her mouth down his chest and started to suck on his nipple.

Matthew pushed her back gently, grabbing her hand from his chest and her other hand from where she'd been running it down his flat stomach, her objective clear. He held tightly onto her wrists as he looked at her. Demon could see the corners of his mouth twitching, and could feel that he was more

amused than angry. His mouth wasn't the only thing that was twitching. Glancing down between their bodies, Demon could see that his cock was stiffening, so she pushed her hips forward to rub against it. He grunted softly as she rotated her pelvis against him.

"You know that you're going to have pay for this, don't you?" Matthew's voice was low and sexy, as he leaned forward and kissed her neck, still holding her wrists tightly.

Demon started to nibble on his ear, pausing to whisper, "What's the penalty, Captain?"

Matthew released her wrists suddenly, and moved his hands to the neckline of her T-shirt. "Well, we'll start with a shirt for a shirt." He grasped the material between his hands, and pulled sharply, ripping the front of the T-shirt in two, exposing his wife's breasts. He dropped his head and took her hardened nipple in his mouth, nipping it gently between his teeth.

Demon moaned, as she felt his hands move to the waist of her jeans and start to unfasten them. She ran her hands across his shoulders, as she whispered, "We've got about fifteen minutes before the others arrive." She heard Matthew's deep chuckle.

"Plenty of time for a quickie."

Gideon lay on top of Deborah, still deep inside her, recovering. They'd brought each other to an explosive climax, waves of pleasure surging through them both, Deborah's powers taking in his and her own orgasm, and projecting it out again, driving them both to multiple releases. Gideon wondered how long it was going to take him to find the energy to lift himself off her, but he managed to raise his head enough to look down at his wife, lying beneath him.

"You're insatiable, you know that? Normal days you get it morning and night. On my day off you want it morning, noon *and* night. You're going to wear it out."

Deborah smiled up at him lazily, her eyes darkened with the aftermath of sated lust. "You always satisfy me, and I think there's plenty of life in the old dog yet." He felt her squeeze her internal muscles around his cock to prove her point.

Gideon groaned in pleasure at the sensation, and was lowering his head to kiss her, when the outer door buzzer sounded. "Shit! They're early!"

He pushed himself up and off her, leaving the warmth of her vagina with regret. Looking around frantically, he saw her torn T-shirt and grabbed it quickly, using it to clean himself before he ran to the wardrobe. Hearing Deborah's husky laugh, he turned to see that she hadn't moved, but still lay, legs spread wide, on their bed. Gideon grinned over his shoulder, as he snatched a pair of pants and pulled them on, easing the zipper carefully over his still half-stiff cock. "Unless you want me to send John and Luke in to finish what I started, maybe you'd better get dressed."

He watched as Deborah lifted herself from the bed, and moved rapidly but unhurriedly to the bathroom. Swatting her butt as she passed, Gideon seized a T-shirt and pulled it on, as he left the bedroom and headed for the outer door.

Luke turned to Lily as they stood in the corridor outside the Gideons' quarters. "They're taking their time about answering, aren't they? Are you sure we're not early?"

He watched as Lily closed her eyes and her face took on the relaxed smile that he'd learned to associate with her 'talking' to her sisters. When she opened them again, she giggled. "No, we're punctual, but Matthew and Demon lost track of the time. They were..." she paused as she searched for a word, "engaged."

The door opened and Luke turned to see the Captain standing there, smiling in welcome, surreptitiously trying to tuck his T-shirt into the back of his pants. [I bet you were engaged!] Luke smiled to himself.

As they walked into the living area, Demon emerged from the bedroom. Her welcome was warm and gracious. She might have got away with it, if her shirt hadn't been buttoned unevenly. Luke watched as she left for the kitchen, and smiled when he saw that the back of her hair was matted into knots. The sort of knots that only got made when the head was rubbed vigorously against a pillow. Luke turned and glanced at John. Even in his current overwrought state, the telepath's mouth was curling into a smile, which he was working hard to suppress.

John's mental voice carried clearly to his partners. *[[It's a good job we didn't arrive a couple of minutes earlier. From the smiles on their faces, I don't think we actually interrupted them.]]*

Lily's giggle interrupted Gideon's description of what Demon had prepared for lunch. Luke smiled as he saw the Captain look suspiciously at the tiny redhead he was leading to the dining table, but Lily's face was a picture of wide-eyed innocence as she returned Gideon's gaze.

Having seated his guests, Gideon said, "I'll just help Deborah bring in the food," and left hurriedly.

Luke looked at his partners. *[[I'm sorry, but this is way too good an opportunity to miss. I just have to do this.]]*

John sent a warning, *[[Luke, don't...]]*

He was interrupted by Lily's enthusiastic, *[[YES!]]*

As Demon and Gideon returned, carrying bowls and plates, Luke waited for them to sit before he leaned forward and asked, "So did you have a good work out, Matt? You know, regular aerobic exercise is important for someone who spends as much time sitting in that Captain's chair as you do. You need to get the heart racing and the blood pumping. I do hope that Demon is making sure you do it every day. Exercise that is."

Gideon leaned back in his chair, and narrowed his eyes as he answered. "Oh, you can be sure of that, Doc. Deborah makes sure I stick to a rigorous regime. Morning, noon and night."

Gideon carried the last dirty dishes into the kitchen, and passed them to Deborah to place in the sterilizer. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. "Well?"

Deborah finished loading the machine, closed it and set the timer, before turning to face him, frowning. She looked up at him and he could see the worry in her eyes. "He's terrified of something. Not just apprehensive or concerned. It's a deep down, visceral fear, that's eating away at him. I don't understand

why he's feeling like that, but it took everything I had not to react to it."

Gideon watched as her eyes filled with tears, and her face reflected the fears she'd opened herself up to during their lunch. He stepped forward quickly and took her into his arms, hugging her closely. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you..." His words were stopped by her mouth touching his. Deborah's kiss momentarily drove all other thoughts and concerns from his mind.

When she released his lips, she leaned back a little and smiled sadly. "I would have done it even if you hadn't asked. Lily is worried too, remember? And I tried to project as much happiness and confidence as I could, but I don't know how much effect it had."

Gideon smiled and squeezed her. "It made the rest of us happy, even if it didn't get through to John." He pulled his wife's head into his neck and kissed her forehead gently. "I just wish there were something else I could do for him."

Deborah pulled her head back and smiled at him. "There's nothing you can do for John right now, but Lily has some plans to distract him on the way to back to their quarters." Her smile turned into an impish grin, and Gideon was relieved to see that the threat of tears had faded. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, as she went on, "Now, I seem to remember I have some punishment coming. What exactly did you have in mind, Captain?"

Gideon smiled wickedly. "Just call me Captain Bligh. I think a little keel hauling may be in order, but it's your keel that's going to get hauled." He pulled Deborah back tightly against him and kissed her passionately.

They sat in the bullet car silently, Luke and Lily framing John, while he sat between them with his head lowered. His hands were clasped in his lap, his eyes fixed on the floor, his face blank, quiet on the surface, but his mind was reeling, circling around the same thoughts over and over. In the last few days, it had become harder and harder for him to concentrate on daily life, with the impending... [Stop it! You need to calm down!] John cursed himself for his inability to break out of this vicious circle.

Only with great effort had he been able to relax enough during lunch to actually make conversation, if not the most sophisticated one. [Well, and with Demon's help, too.] John knew she'd been affected by his mood, but still the empath had sent a constant stream of happiness and confidence, obviously for his benefit. He'd been touched by his expanded family's love and support for him--he'd sensed it from everybody around the table, even through his block--but as soon as he'd left Matthew's quarters, his heart had begun to sink again.

John's mind was suddenly jerked back from the dark realms it had been in, when he felt something soft touch his cheek, accompanied by a wave of love and concern. He looked to his right, finding Lily smiling sadly at him.

"I just had to make sure you hadn't turned into a statue," she said softly.

John managed a weak smile. "Sorry," he murmured and he lowered his eyes for a moment, "It's just..." He looked up at Lily again, and her eyes showed such absolute trust and love that his voice failed, and he suddenly had difficulty getting air past the lump in his throat. He felt overwhelmed, and at the same time ashamed. [I don't deserve it.]

Lily picked up on his feelings and shifted on the bench seat to face him, lifting her right hand to touch his cheek. "John, we love you. You, John Matheson, the full package, not just the part you let the public see, the nice and shiny bits. We love you, including your deepest fears, your worst hatreds, all your failings and shortcomings. We love *you*."

Lily leaned forward, her lips meeting John's in the softest kiss, and at the same moment he felt Luke's lips touch his neck, sending a wave of love and agreement with what Lily had said, as his arms came around John's shoulders in a caressing embrace. Luke traced his lips up John's neck, while Lily deepened their kiss, her tongue entering his mouth. Although he knew he should, John didn't push them away. The warmth of their bodies, of their minds discreetly brushing against the edge of his, felt too understanding, too comforting for him to not cling to them, like a drowning man to a piece of wood.

He gasped when Luke nipped his neck, eyes flying open--[When did I close them?]-and he suddenly became aware of their surroundings again. John struggled free from Lily's kiss and gasped, "Stop, not here."

Lily grinned at him lasciviously, and John briefly wondered how she'd ended up straddling him, with Luke half-kneeling, half-sitting closely beside him. "Why not?" the redhead asked, her purring voice sending shivers up John's spine and making his cock twitch, "I always had this fantasy about making love on public transport." Before John could react, Lily pulled his head down into another passionate kiss.

John could feel Luke's chuckle sending vibrations through his body. His older lover's warm, moist breath tickled his ear as he whispered, "Do we use your override codes or mine?" But John was unable to answer, unable to remember any of the codes that could be of use now, unable to *think*.

Luke chuckled again, and his voice instructed the computer to put the bullet car on a loop, and block all communications except medical emergencies. Then his mouth returned to John's neck, grazing his teeth up the back to the base of his skull, sending shivers down his spine. John felt himself giving in to the physical sensations, letting them drown out the turmoil of voices and thoughts in the back of his head, for a little while at least.

Gideon paused as they left the kitchen, heading for the bedroom. "I'll just make sure we don't get any interruptions. You go on ahead and get naked. I'll be in to start your punishment in a minute." Deborah chuckled and wiggled her butt at him as she walked away, lingering just long enough for him to catch her with a slap on her ass, which was exactly what she'd been angling for.

She glanced over her shoulder and flashed him a sexy smile. "Don't keep me waiting, or I might have to find someone else to punish me." Gideon snorted his amusement at her empty threat, as Deborah disappeared into the bedroom. He turned to the comm. unit on the wall behind the dining table, and called his second officer.

Her voice emerged from the speaker. "Jackson."

"Lieutenant? Just checking in. Everything OK?" Gideon was sure she would have called him if there'd been a problem.

"All quiet. This is a particularly boring stretch of hyperspace. The ship is fine, except we've just noticed that one of the bullet cars is stuck in a loop. It seems to have been programmed that way by Dr.

Raven. I'm a little concerned that he's got himself stuck in there, and there's no response to our signals, so I'm sending in a maintenance crew." Jackson sounded worried as she explained.

Gideon smiled to himself, as he remembered what Deborah had said. "Oh, I don't think that's necessary, Lieutenant. The doctor's a big boy. If he's locked himself in, it won't do him any harm for a few hours. It'll teach him to learn how to program the things right. If he hasn't stopped circling by 18:00, send in the maintenance crew." That should give Luke, John, and Lily more than enough time to do whatever it was that they were doing.

The Captain continued, "I'm going to catch a few hours sleep, so unless the four horsemen of the Apocalypse come calling, I'm hanging out the 'do not disturb' sign. OK?" Jackson laughed and agreed, then signed off.

Gideon walked into the bedroom where Deborah stood waiting for him. She was already naked and without a word spoken, she moved to pull off his T-shirt and pants.

Deborah's naked body was spread across Gideon's legs as he sat on the edge of their bed, her head and breasts hanging to his left, her hair cascading to the floor. His right hand fondled the cheeks of her ass, slightly raised by his right leg, her legs parted. She was perfectly positioned for what he had in mind.

Gideon brought his right hand down onto his wife's ass, a stinging slap that made her inhale sharply. Then he slid his hand between her legs and found her clitoris, rubbing it gently, then slipping a finger inside her. The moan of pleasure that followed made him smile as he withdrew his hand and slapped her other cheek, bringing a small whimper of protest from her. He carried on alternately spanking and fondling, until her hips were thrusting rhythmically into his legs and he could tell that she was approaching climax.

While his right hand had been occupied at Deborah's rear end, Gideon's left hand had been fondling her breasts, feeling her nipples harden as her arousal grew. With each jolt of her body as he'd spanked her, her ribcage had rubbed his cock, stiffening it, bringing him to the point where he needed to take her *now*. Seeing that his wife's ass cheeks were both pink and hearing her beg him to fuck her, Gideon decided that it was time to give her what she wanted. [Not that it's such a great sacrifice,] he thought as he gently slid her off his legs.

Deborah came to rest on all fours on the floor, and Gideon moved rapidly to kneel behind her. He knew from the wetness of his hand, where he'd been slowly finger fucking her, that she was wet and ready, so he pushed into her from behind, with one long, slow, deep penetration, only stopping when his balls made contact with her. Then he held still for a moment, holding her hips tightly against him to prevent her moving. He was too damned close to coming himself, and was determined to make this last as long as possible.

Constantly keeping his cock deep inside Deborah, but varying the depth and speed of his movements, Gideon brought his wife to the edge of orgasm, then kept her there, never quite allowing her to go over. He reached under her and fingered her clit, lifting her closer and closer to release, but always withdrawing his hand when he felt her getting too near.

Deborah was now screaming his name, cursing and swearing at him, pounding her hips back into his pelvis, desperate to come, and Gideon knew that he couldn't hold back any longer. Reaching under her,

he fingered her clit one last time, at the same time pushing hard into her from behind, hitting the spot deep within her that he knew would give her a simultaneous vaginal and clitoral orgasm. Deborah's scream of passion, as he finally let her come, was echoed by his own, as her waves of pleasure swept over him, forcing his own orgasm at last. Gideon felt himself releasing a torrent of heat within her, spurt after spurt, as each wave of her orgasm hit him. All thought and reason fled, as they became one conjoined fucking machine, each dedicated to giving and taking as much pleasure as they could. All consciousness of time vanished, as they joined, body, mind and spirit, in what felt like hours of total ecstasy, until finally, physical exhaustion overwhelmed them, and they collapsed to the floor.

Gideon lay on Deborah's back, feeling the wetness between them where they had both sweated heavily. Every point where his body touched hers was running with perspiration, his and hers, from their exertions. As awareness gradually returned, and he became conscious of something more than his own body, Gideon slowly realized that his wife's body was shaking beneath him. It took all his energy to lift his hand and pull back her hair, from where it covered her face. He realized that Deborah was weeping softly.

Wiping the tears away, as they rolled down her cheek, Gideon kissed her gently. "What's the matter? I didn't really hurt you, did I?" He lifted himself out of her and off of her, to lie on his side next to her, and he looked into her face, continuing to stroke her cheek, wiping away the tears.

Deborah shook her head, as she opened her eyes to look into his. "No, I love it when you spank me." She lifted her hand, to run her fingers over his face, touching his eyes, nose, mouth, and jaw line, seeming to need to see him with her hands, as well as her eyes. "It's just..."

Gideon waited, while she tried to find the words, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tightly to him, so they lay on their sides on the floor, facing each other. He could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, and twined his legs around hers, so that every part of them was touching. Deborah tucked her head under his chin and whispered, "I love you so much that sometimes it scares me. What if I were to lose you? How could I live without you?"

Gideon felt his own eyes fill with tears, as he gently kissed the top of her head. "That's never going to happen. I'll never let you go."

They lay in each other's arms, until they fell asleep on the floor.

Luke was sitting on the couch in the quarters he shared with his family, trying to relax and watch an old movie version of 'Much Ado About Nothing'. Angel had loaned him the data crystal of the movie, after they'd found out they both liked Shakespeare and old movies, though to her, these movies weren't as old as for him, of course.

He'd been trying to relax, but after a short while sitting beside him, changing positions restlessly, Lily had gotten up and started pacing around the living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom--all of their quarters except the twins' bedroom, since they were both asleep.

Finally, Luke surrendered to the fact that he would have to watch the movie at another time and turned it off with a sigh. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, watching Lily continue to pace out of the bathroom and past him, to circle the living room one more time. She didn't even seem to have noticed that the viewscreen had gone blank. Actually, Luke was quite sure she hadn't, because he

recognized that look in her eyes. It always meant her mind was light-years away.

"Lily!" he said softly, trying to coax her back, then as she didn't react, repeated her name louder, using the full weight of his CMO voice. "Lily!"

His red-haired lover snapped out of her trance and looked at him, her mind obviously still occupied with whatever was bothering her. [And I think it's a safe guess what that is, my love, because it's bothering me too.] Aloud he said, "You're gonna wear through the floor and land a deck lower, if you continue like this."



"Hmm?" Lily asked, blinking and looking at him as if she'd just awoken from a dream.

Luke gave her a wry grin and shook his head. "Never mind." He got up from the sofa and walked to stand before her, resting his left hand on her shoulder, while he put his right under her chin, lifting her face up until she looked into his eyes. "What is it, Lily?"

Her expression changed from absent to one of worry and pain, and the look in her incredibly green eyes as she said one word almost made his heart stop. "John."

Luke knew what Lily meant. Their telepathic lover had withdrawn from them more and more over the past few weeks, to the point where he'd refused to share minds with them. After they'd been able to drag themselves out of the bullet car and home this afternoon, he'd even stopped 'talking' to them mentally. The loss of that nuance of their relationship hurt deeply--most of all for their lonely telepath. As if to make up for that, John had sought ever more physical closeness. When they had sat on the couch together in the afternoon, with John cuddled up between Lily and Luke, he'd held onto them tightly, almost desperately. Then suddenly he'd shaken them off, got up, and announced in a flat voice that he had to go to his old quarters to finish some paperwork. He hadn't even come home for dinner.

Luke smiled down at Lily gently, sadly, letting her see his own worry for their partner. "I know. But I'm afraid we can't do any more for him than we already have. God knows I would, if there were anything..."

Lily cut him off. "There is! We can't just leave him alone in the face of this!"

Luke sighed softly. "But he's retreated from us on purpose, Lily. I know just as well as you do that he didn't go to his old quarters to do paperwork. But I'm not sure if we should intrude on his privacy. In this case, it may just be what he needs to build his strength for..."

Lily shook her head adamantly, sending her red curls flying. "But that's just it, Luke! He doesn't build strength as he should. Au contraire, as has been obvious over the past few weeks. Especially today! You know John; he's probably working himself into a frenzy right now, his brain zeroing in on everything that could go wrong, feeding off his fears, whatever they are. That he didn't tell us, shows clearly that something is very, very wrong. And once John starts doubting himself, he gets sucked into that vicious circle, and he'll never get out by himself. The only way to get him through this, is if we stand with him as one." She reached her hand up to caress Luke's cheek, her eyes burning with emotions. "Sweet Face needs us, Sad Eyes. Now more than ever."

John Matheson almost jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand touch his knee. He'd been sitting on the sofa, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped, head hanging and eyes closed. Within a split-second, he sat up straight, staring wide-eyed at Luke and Lily who were sitting on their heels before him. Lily's hands rested on his right knee. It took him a while to calm down his racing heart and regain his voice enough so he could speak.

"Dear God, Lily, you could have given me a heart attack!" He hadn't heard the connecting door to the quarters he shared with his family open, or anyone entering. [No wonder--your whole concentration was turned inwards.]

Lily's wide-open eyes were boring into his, silently pleading, as she said, "You won't stand a chance all alone, John. You said it yourself at our hand-fasting--when we join, we become one family, working together for the good of the whole like the members of a wolf pack."

"Lily is right, John." Luke softly added, reaching up to touch his arm gently. "We have to get through this as a family..."

John snorted a laugh that even in his ears sounded hysterical. "We'll lose our family!"

Luke frowned. "Why do you say that? You don't know..."

"Yes, I do," John interrupted softly, but with a finality that didn't leave any room for argument.

Luke blinked, at a loss for words, while Lily continued to just look up at their telepathic lover, a whirlwind of emotions showing in her green eyes, as she tried to understand why he was so afraid.

"Don't you ever listen to me? Share with us, John! It will eat you alive, if you don't," Lily finally said softly.

For a long while, John just looked at her, his eyes so full of love and pain that she had to suppress her urge to reach out and take him into her arms.

"But that's just the problem, isn't it?" John finally whispered, "We shared everything." He closed his eyes and leaned back, resting the back of his head against the wall. "Maybe too much."

Lily's eyes widened, and she looked at him as if he'd slapped her, mouth open and lips trembling. "John! Never, ever say that again! Sharing with someone you love and trust is never wrong! It's a blessing, it's a strength! But it's never a problem!" She paused, mentally nudging him to join their minds, to explain with thoughts if he couldn't with words, but to no avail. He had closed down, so she continued with spoken words. "If I could go back to the day when the Excalibur arrived above Eriadne for the first time, knowing what I know now, I would do what I did all over again. I wouldn't want to change a single moment, no matter what the future may bring. I would share everything with you again."

The wave of sincerity and love John felt through Lily's and Luke's touch made tears well up in his eyes. Abruptly, he shook their hands off, turning away in a desperate attempt to compose himself, then finally turned back and looked down at them, taking a deep breath. "I'd rather die or spend the rest of



my life as a mental cripple, than let anything bad happen to any of you."

Luke gasped, eyes wide with horror, and Lily's eyes filled with tears as she uttered a plaintive cry. "John!"

John closed his eyes in desperation and leaned his head into his hands. He could feel his lovers' pain as if it was his own. [I'd have to sneak off the Excalibur, take one of the shuttles and erase any records of my departure, then

find some people I know from my Corps days who could help me get hold of what I need to... to...] He shut his eyes tightly. [The Goddess help me, I can't do it! I want to be there for my family, live with them, not be a burden for them and have them blame themselves for what I did to myself!]

Another thought kept circling in his mind. [Whatever I do, I'll fail all those who follow me. All those telepaths who sent me messages, telling me how they wanted to be like me, how grateful they were that I'd proved that telepaths could work among and live with 'normals'. I always did what I felt was right, and yet I betrayed them. By protecting my family, I destroyed the only chance that members of my wider family will ever have of leading a life without oppression and fear!] He whispered, "I don't see any way out," distantly realizing that he was crying.

"John," Lily said softly, and he could tell by the sound of her voice that she was crying too, "please don't make any decisions alone. This is about all of us, so tell us what has made you so frightened, then we can decide together what we should and can do. And if there really is nothing we can do right now, we have to wait until the odds change."

John felt her hands cup his face and gently lift his head up, waiting for him to open his eyes and look at her and Luke. He finally did, seeing tears on their cheeks, and suddenly found himself clinging to them in a blind panic. [*I can't bear the thought of living without you! I'd give up everything to be with you and our children, my job on the Excalibur, my career in EF and the ISA, whatever it takes, but even that wouldn't help anymore! They'll take you away and they'll hurt you and your sisters again Lily, and our babies--I should have known, I never should have allowed...]*]

[*John! Stop it! I won't let that happen! We won't let that happen!*] Lily lifted his head from her shoulder and kissed him deeply, passionately, pouring all her love into this kiss, letting him feel her determination. Luke echoed these feelings, wordlessly telling him to not give up as he kissed the side of John's face. During his self-imposed mental and emotional retreat, John had been starving for the comfort of his lovers' mental touch. Now he clung to Luke and Lily's assurances and their love, letting himself be lifted out of that dark pit of desperation he'd been in for too long, to a place where nothing mattered but their arms enfolding him, their lips covering his mouth, their touch electrifying his skin wherever it was exposed to them.

For a moment, he was torn, as a voice screamed inside his head, [No! Don't do this; it could be their undoing! You already failed in the bullet car, not again!] The voice told him to disentangle himself from their embrace, to tear himself away, when he wanted nothing more than drown in them. [If we are all damned anyway, I want to share everything with them one last time,] he thought back at the voice, in defiance.

John let them pull him down onto the floor, and push him onto his back, then suddenly something flashed in the soft light of his quarters. Before he could react, Lily had cut the front of his T-shirt from neck to waist with her dagger, and the sharp weapon disappeared again, as the redhead bent

down to attack his nipple. John arched his back and moaned, but was immediately silenced by Luke's lips covering his. He opened his mouth and welcomed the other man's tongue with his own, drawing it into a slow, passionate dance.

John's hands searched and found Luke's chest and started undoing the buttons on his shirt. Soon it was gone, thrown away carelessly, followed in quick succession by the T-shirt his older lover had worn underneath, John's own torn T-shirt, and Lily's dress. Her green eyes were burning with desire as she lowered her mouth onto John's, cupping his face with her hands.

Luke was trailing kisses over his chest, then meandered to Lily's back and opened the clasp of her bra with his teeth. Still kissing her, John removed the lace and brought his hands up to fondle her breasts, rubbing the hardening right nipple between his fingers while rubbing his palm against her other breast. He could feel Luke's mouth back on his body, moving down, then his hands lightly pulling on John's hips, signaling him to lift them. John did, moaning against Lily's mouth, as he felt his briefs slide past his hard cock. They were pulled down his legs and feet, followed by Luke's soft kisses. Then his lover worked his way up again, his hard cock brushing John's left leg as he straddled it, until he reached his middle. Cradling his shaft into one hand, Luke gently nibbled up the length of John's penis, making him moan, then gasp as he took the tip into his mouth.

John had to break away from Lily's lips as his older lover's tongue swirled around the head of his penis, making his head swim, and he closed his eyes and let his head roll to the side in an effort to regain control. The tiny redhead took the opportunity and lowered her head to nibble on his earlobe. John could feel her breasts rest lightly on his chest and opened his eyes again, reaching up to pull her closer until he could take her nipple into his mouth. While his tongue and teeth worked on it, his hands were busy exploring Lily's body, kneading her firm ass cheeks. Hearing her breath quickening, he kept teasing her hard nipple, feeling her arousal grow through their joined minds.

John moaned in protest when Luke's mouth suddenly left his cock, and he felt a flicker of a thought pass from Luke to Lily. She gently withdrew her breast from his mouth, then moved to straddle him and went down onto all fours. Bending lower she softly rubbed her lips against his, teasing him. John lifted his head up, catching her mouth in a passionate kiss while his hands caressed her sides and back.

Lily gave in to the kiss, answering aggressively, then suddenly retreated. Still on all fours, she pushed back against Luke, who John now realized was kneeling behind her. John knew what Luke had planned, when he reached for the cushion he'd taken off the couch in the meantime. John lifted his hips and let his ass sink down onto it after Luke had placed it there. All of him was tingling with anticipation now.

Left hand resting on Lily's hip, Luke reached around with his right, sliding his fingers between her wet labia, making her throw back her head and close her eyes with a soft purr. With a satisfied smile, Luke withdrew his lubricated fingers and moved them to John's asshole, gently massaging the sensitive skin around and just inside it. John gasped, mentally urging him to go on, which earned him an amused, *[[Impatient?]]* from Lily while her lips, tongue and teeth caressed his smooth chest, her round little ass still up in the air.

He was unable to answer as he felt Luke remove his fingers from his ass. The other man's eyes never left John's face as he leaned forward, gently nipping Lily's back, then pulled her hips back against him to enter her with a single, slow stroke until he filled her completely. He withdrew again and shifted, lifting John's legs and putting his feet flat onto the floor, and only a moment later, John could feel Luke's hands cup his ass and the tip of his lubricated cock press against his asshole.

Carefully, his lover pushed inside him, drawing a deep moan from John's throat. When his cock was buried inside John's ass to the root, Luke held still, and Lily lifted her head to give her Asian lover a wicked grin, then scrambled down along his body and got up onto her knees, giving him a good view of her naked body. Eyes riveted to John's, and guided by Luke's hands on her hips, she sank down until the tip of John's erect cock touched her wet folds. Rotating her hips slightly, the tiny redhead went down further, slowly taking him deep into her hot wet center until she sat on his thighs. For a moment, they were absolutely still, then Luke started thrusting gently. Lily moved in the opposite direction, pushing down onto John when Luke thrust into him, their moves gradually growing faster.

Lily bent forward, offering John her breasts, and he was making her gasp, as he sucked and licked her hard, erect nipples. Her long hair fell around them like a curtain, as her long fingernails dug into his shoulders, pain adding to the excitement. He could feel Luke and Lily's rising arousal as well, but they seemed intent on driving him crazy, heating him up until he was on the brink of orgasm, then cooling him down, again and again, until he couldn't stand it anymore, until he begged them.

Suddenly, their rhythm increased, faster, harder, and John could feel Lily contract the muscles inside her vagina as she propped herself up, increasing the pressure and stimulation on his cock, and he could feel himself lose control. He threw his head back and cried out, taking them with him as he exploded into orgasm, bodies spasming with the violence of wave after wave surging through them, then they finally collapsed into a heap onto the floor, panting heavily.

As he lay in Luke and Lily's arms in the afterglow, again feeling their physical and mental caresses and assurances, the walls John had built inside him over the past weeks crumbled. Words and images gushed forth, as he finally let his lovers know why he was so terrified, and their surprise, pain and horror came back clearly, but also their love and determination.

[We will not let this divide us.]

Suddenly, John was unable to hold the tears back any longer, and all he could do was hold on tightly to Lily and Luke as his body was shaken by loud sobs.

John seemed to have cried for hours, when eventually the soothing noises and caresses from his lovers took effect. They had tried to send love and reassurance, though that had been hard under the assault of the telepath's pain, fear, and anguish. His sobs had finally subsided, and he was crying softly now. Lily looked at Luke over the top of John's head, which was buried against her shoulder. She could see her worries reflected in Luke's brown eyes, shimmering with unshed tears, as she knew hers did too.

[[Shh, we'll find a way, be calm now,]] Lily sent to John as she kissed his black hair. She could feel a pang of guilt and shame from him. *[[Yes, you should have told us as soon as you found out, but we can't do anything about that now. We are, and always will be, one family, no matter what happens.]]* She gently lifted John's head up to look into his eyes. Red and swollen, with tears still running silently down his cheeks, her heart went out to him. *[[John, we will always love you, no matter what.]]*

Lily could feel another wave of desperation threatening John, but Luke turned the younger man's face around to look at him. *[[We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but for now, we are still here. Never forget that. This is real, not your fears!]]* As if to prove his words, Luke pressed his lips against John's in the softest of kisses, and the younger man responded desperately, silently pleading with his lovers for forgiveness.

Lily and Luke hurried to reassure him that there was nothing to forgive, holding him tightly, soothing him with mental and physical caresses. One thing led to another, and they were soon making love again, but more slowly, more gently this time. Unnoticed by her men, Lily was weaving a spell over John with every move of her body, her mouth silently forming the words to enwrap him in their love and give him strength, to protect him, whispering the last word when they climaxed together in an intense, long, slow orgasm.

Lily could feel that John had calmed down a little as they lay in each other's arms in their bed later. Their minds were still joined, and she could feel him falling asleep, just like Luke who lay on John's other side, his arm draped over their lover's chest. Lily did the same and laid her hand on top of Luke's arm, hooking her leg over John's and touching Luke's, enveloping the telepath in a protective embrace. For a while, she lay there, staring into the darkness of their bedroom, in deep contemplation, momentarily blocking her thoughts from her lovers' minds. Her face set in an expression of determination, and she nodded to herself, then the tiny redhead closed her eyes and opened her mind again, taking a deep breath before allowing herself to drift off to sleep.

John lifted Faylinn into his arms, holding her in a gentle yet firm embrace, sending all his love to her, then he put her back into her cot and did the same with Dasha. After putting him back, John turned to look at Luke and Lily who were standing behind him. For a moment, they just stood there, looking at each other, then his lovers rushed to him and threw their arms around him. No words were spoken, as they held him tightly, until finally, reluctantly, he withdrew from their embrace. "It's time," John said, forcing himself to stay calm.

His partners walked John to the door of their quarters. He turned around to look at them one last time after he'd stepped out into the corridor. Luke nodded at him in silent encouragement, and Lily traced a sigil in the air, murmuring a blessing, then said softly, "Everything will be all right. I know it will," just as the door closed. For a moment, John stood outside the door, wondering what exactly she had meant by that, then shook his head and left for the bullet car to the bridge.

Inside their quarters, Lily noticed Luke studying her face. "Go on, you'll be late," she told him brusquely, softening her words with a kiss on his lips, before fleeing to the children's room.

Gideon looked up from the computer screen displaying their new orders, when the door buzzer of his office sounded. "Open," he called, then added, "Good morning, Lieutenant."

"Good morning, Sir," Matheson answered as he entered, standing stiffly just inside the door, his face deceptively calm. Gideon could see the nervousness and fear lurking behind his XO's dark eyes. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Captain, but Mr. Jones insisted on talking to you, privately, before I show him to his quarters."

Gideon clenched his jaw, then put on his poker face and nodded.

Matheson stepped aside and murmured, "I'll wait outside," after the short, stout, bald man, had entered, clad in black from his shoes, through his shirt, to his tailored suit.

As soon as the door had closed behind Matheson, Jones said without preamble, "First of all, Captain, I'd like to advise you that I and my superiors at the Bureau of Telepath Integration are well aware of your objections to this necessary procedure. As a matter of courtesy, I wanted to inform you, as I already did Lt. Matheson, that since he missed his last two inspections," Gideon had to suppress a smirk, as he could hear the disapproval in the watchdog's voice, "and furthermore, since his promotion has been approved subject to his passing *this* inspection, there is absolutely no room for leniency. You have to understand and accept that this time we will have to be especially thorough and rigorous. This means I will have to carry out several deep scans of Lt. Matheson over the next few days. I hope for his sake that the reasons given for his missing the last two inspections were valid, and not just fabrications to cover up missteps on his or anyone else's part. If the latter were the case, the consequences would be dire. It's hard to believe that Mr. Matheson has managed to save Earth *twice* in the last year, both times when his scan was due. It's amazing that he didn't get at least an award or two for his heroics." Jones looked at Gideon for a moment, his green eyes coolly meeting the Captain's narrow-eyed glare, then the telepath nodded stiffly and left the office.

For several seconds, Gideon stared at the empty air where Jones had stood, then he slumped back in his chair, taking a sharp breath. Finally, he allowed his emotions, which he'd clamped down on while the telepath had been present, to escape. It was a mixture of shock, guilt, and nausea. [Dear God, what have I done?]

John had missed his first inspection accidentally, since at the appointed time, the Excalibur had only just left Eriadne after their 'working vacation' and they were too far out for anyone to reach them. [But the second time, it was entirely my idea. It would have been better to send John on shore leave while we were testing the 'local fauna' on Theta 49. Will he be able to hide the fact that Black and his people are still alive from such thorough scans? Or that we broke Angel out of jail on Mars? And if not, what will they do to him? They'll probably take him away from us, from his family--Deborah will kill me for doing this to her sister! Dear God, no wonder John was so terrified of this inspection! But why didn't he tell me?]

Gideon let his head fall back against the top of his chair and closed his eyes, feeling bile rise in his mouth, as the answer bubbled up in his mind. [Because he wanted to protect me, like he always does. Because he didn't want me to feel guilty and responsible for this.] He opened his eyes and stared blindly at the ceiling. [But I am. I did what I could to finish this charade, but it wasn't enough, not fast enough, and now it may just be too late.] Gideon leaned forward, his elbows on the desk and his head leaning in his hands, feeling a headache coming on. [And by pushing for his promotion, I've just made everything worse. I may have destroyed my best friend's life.]

John sat down in the same chair in his quarters as he had for every other inspection, but this time, it was different. This time, there was much more at stake, but he was determined not to go under without a fight. While Jones sat down in another chair opposite him--unlike all the other Joneses who had visited him, this one hadn't shown the slightest interest in the decorations of his quarters or small-talk of the 'I'm sorry but this is necessary' kind--John briefly wondered what Jones had told Gideon. He also wondered whether Luke had gone to work already, and what Lily and the twins were doing now. He dragged his attention back to the bald man who said, "No preambles, Lieutenant. We both know why I'm here."

John pressed his lips together and, sending a fast prayer to whatever Gods would listen, prepared for the mental intrusion, as Jones narrowed his eyes almost imperceptibly.

Nothing happened.

At first, John thought Jones was just playing with him, teasing him, but then he noticed the surprised look in the other man's eyes, and how he concentrated more--and then he felt odd himself. [Almost as if...] He cut off that thought, just in case he was wrong.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jones said from between gritted teeth.

"I'm not..."

"That's impossible!" Jones interrupted him, "You're only a P6, you can't be blocking me!"

"Sir..."

"How is this possible?" Jones broke off his efforts, sweating now, and glared at John. "We are the only telepaths on board this ship, so who--or what--is blocking me?"

"Sir, I have no idea! I only know that I can't sense anything either!" John looked at Mr. Jones wide-eyed, feeling light-headed. [No, this can't be! This must be a nightmare!]

Jones stared at John, then his eyes became unfocused as he apparently tried to sense the other occupants of the ship. Being a P10 or higher, he should have been able to sense at least the people nearby, despite the shielding around the quarters. John only 'heard' a constant background hum, if he let his mental shields down completely when he was inside his quarters. Suddenly, Jones' nostrils flared, and he looked at John again. "What are you doing? Where did you find a technology that can block telepaths? This is a violation of all the rules..."

"I already told you, I don't know what's going on! Everything was fine, until you tried to scan me!"

Jones glared at him. "So is it Gideon who planned this? Is this why you had to miss the last two inspections? Well, your Captain will find out that this will only mean another delay. It won't keep us from carrying out our inspection, here or somewhere else if necessary. We *will* find whatever is blocking me." He gave John a derisive look. "We'll be back." Then he stormed out of John's quarters.

Matheson slumped back in his chair, taking a deep, shuddering breath. [Please tell me what I think isn't true!]

"Don't think this is over!"

Gideon looked up from the datapad he was reading, startled by the snarling voice. Whirling around in the Captain's chair, he found Jones storming onto the bridge and continuing without waiting for a reaction. "Quite the opposite, I can assure you!"

The man seemed livid. Gideon could almost feel the proverbial daggers coming out of Jones' eyes. He stared back blankly, frowning. [Dear God, what did he find out? If he hurt John in any way...] Aloud he said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, don't play the innocent, Captain." Baldy almost spat the title, as he planted himself in front of

Gideon, fists on his hips, glaring at him. "Whatever technology you've found that prevents me from scanning Lt. Matheson--that blocks me completely--we'll come back and find it, along with everyone involved in this conspiracy! For reasons you don't need to know, I won't be with the investigators, but you will see my colleagues--soon. So, don't even *think* about going anywhere with this ship unless you have express orders to do so from your superiors. They have been informed, along with the Bureau of Telepath Integration and the Senate Committee of Metasensory Abilities"

Jones started to turn away, but then stopped and looked back at Gideon. "If I had my way I'd drag Lt. Matheson back with me now, but I suspect collusion, so I'm going to leave you together to sweat. The investigation team will bring warrants that allow them to scan you too, Captain. So if you and Lt. Matheson ARE colluding, we'll soon know about it." Jones gave Gideon one last glare, then turned on his heels and disappeared as quickly as he'd materialized, leaving Gideon to stare after him.

Gideon was barely aware of the guarded looks the bridge crew gave him, as he sat in the Captain's chair, trying to wrap his brain around what Jones had said. When it finally did, he felt sick. [God, this can't be true! Scan? ME? SCAN ME? I certainly don't need those bastards poking around in my head!] He was appalled at the idea of someone seeing his thoughts, his memories, everything, against his will... That brought him up short, as he remembered the reason for Jones' visit. His rising concern pushed the watchdog's threat to the back of his mind. [Knowing his kind, that may have been just an attempt to get at me, as revenge for whatever happened when he tried to scan John.]

Gideon got up and took a deep breath. "Lt. Jackson, you have the bridge."

When Gideon entered John's quarters, he found the young telepath sitting on his couch, holding his head in his hands as he leaned forward.

"Are you OK?" he asked, immediately concerned. This reminded him too much of the Jones visit when they'd been looking for the Well of Forever. [If that damned bastard...]

John looked up, taking a deep breath. "For the moment, yes, but..." He pressed his lips together. "Jones was unable to scan me."

Gideon frowned and went to sit down next to John. "That's what I got from his tirade. But..."

"Why? How?" John finished the question, looking at his Captain with eyes clearly showing the emotional turmoil inside him.

Matthew nodded.

John looked up at the ceiling, a mix of relief, nervousness, and the slightest hint of anger coloring his laugh. "I think the correct question is, 'Who?' God, I can't believe that..." He shook his head, unbelieving, then looked at Gideon again. "Come on."

Gideon's frown deepened, as his XO got up and walked to the concealed door connecting his old quarters to the ones he now shared with Lily, Luke and the twins, but he followed John anyway. He started to get an idea of what John had meant.

They found Lily sitting on the couch in the living room, her feet tucked beneath her and a book in her left hand, cradling Faylinn in her right arm, as the baby was feeding on her breast. Dasha lay sleeping on the easy chair beside her. The redhead looked up, and as she saw John, she smiled protectively, immediately putting her book on the armrest, facedown, and reaching out her hand. "Sweet Face! How are you? Good morning, Matthew."

While Gideon murmured an answer, John stopped a few steps from the couch, looking down at his lover, studying her face intently. Ignoring her outstretched hand, as well as her question, he asked one of his own in a soft voice. "What did you do, Lily?"

Lily's smile faded slightly and her hand slowly sank onto the armrest, but she held his gaze and raised her chin. "I told you I wouldn't let them destroy our family."

After silent seconds in which they could have heard a pin drop, John snorted a laugh and walked to the couch to sink down beside Lily, shaking his head as he looked at her, trying to sort out his emotions.

"You blocked Jones?" Matthew asked, his voice incredulous and just a tad amused.

Lily looked up at him and simply answered, "Yes."

Gideon slumped down into the easy chair next to Dasha's, and John could see the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. He glared at his Captain. "It's not funny, Matthew. This isn't over, far from it. They'll start an investigation, send a team of bloodhounds who will turn every stone..."

"I know they'll come to investigate," Lily interrupted, matter-of-factly, "It doesn't matter, John. I can block them wherever they are on the ship, for however long they stay. And they won't find anything." She looked at him calmly.

John stared at her for several seconds, then leaned his head in his hands. [Why can't this nightmare just end?] He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. [Calm down. What's done is done, now you have to concentrate on what's to come.]



"John?" Lily said in a tiny voice, and when he turned to her, he found her looking at him wide-eyed and close to tears. "Are you angry with me?"

John's heart went out to her, as he heard the pain and fear in her voice, and he drew her into a tight embrace, careful not to bother their nursing daughter, rushing to reassure his lover, as he rained kisses on her face. "No, Lily, I'm not... well, I was angry for a moment, but mostly it was just a shock. I wish you'd told me what you planned to do--especially after your speech last night about not making any decisions alone--but I understand why you didn't." He gave her a wry smile, which coaxed a slightly sheepish grin from her.

"I wasn't sure whether the shielding of our quarters would hamper my ability, and I didn't want Jones to find out what I had planned in case it did." Lily leaned her head into John's shoulder, and he heard her snuffle, as her free arm came around his neck. "I'd never do anything that could harm you, John."

"I know, Lily, I know." John gently pushed her back, putting his hand under her chin and lifting her head so she looked at him. "Every man in the universe must be envious as hell of Luke and me, for having such an incredible woman at our side." As he kissed her softly, John gently touched her mind,

letting her know how much he loved her and how overwhelmed he was by what she'd done for him.

Gideon cleared his throat, and when the two lovers turned to look at him he said, "Well, now we know what happened, we have to prepare for what *will* happen next."

"Sir, I can't expect you to..."

"Yes, you can. Deborah and Angel would kill me if I let the Joneses take you away from Lily, and I suspect Ilas would come back from the Outer Rim just to join in the slaughter. I value my life too much to risk that." Gideon gave the couple a wicked grin. "Besides, you can count me in on anything that will put those condescending bastards in their place."

Lily giggled, and Matheson gave him a grateful smile, then took a deep breath. "I don't know about you, Captain, but I could use some coffee. Interested? Lily managed to find some real coffee on Mars."

Gideon's eyes widened as he looked at the tiny redhead. "*Real* coffee? You could ask almost anything of me for a cup of real coffee. Care to share your source with me?"

Lily smiled proudly but shook her head. "Trade secret."

John turned to Lily as he stood. "Tea for you, I assume?"

Lily nodded, "Yes, Sir," and John bent down to place a soft kiss on her forehead, then left for the kitchen.

Lily looked after John until he had disappeared into the kitchen, allowing herself to feel relief that the current crisis was over. [We still have to fight a war, but the first battle is won. And the others not knowing what they are fighting gives us a big advantage.] Her eyes were drawn to her sleeping son, as she wondered whether he'd inherit his physical father's abilities, and especially the accompanying problems. *[[Don't you worry, your family will protect and support you, always,]]* she sent to the sleeping child.

For a while, the only sounds came from Faylinn contentedly suckling on her breast, and John moving about in the kitchen. Suddenly, feeling Gideon's eyes on her, Lily turned to face him, raising her eyebrows questioningly.

Matthew grinned. "I'm trying to decide what I'd do if you were serving under me--commend you for your courage and cunning, or have you court-martialed for doing something immensely stupid."

Lily giggled. "How lucky I am to be a civilian."

John returned carrying three cups on a tray, and gave Gideon a wry grin, as he put it on the low table and handed the cups out. "I'm undecided myself whether I should reward or punish my headstrong witch." He sat down and gave Lily a mock-evil grin as he lifted his cup, then took a sip of his coffee.

Lily shot the grin right back, purring in a low voice, "I'm sure I'll enjoy whatever you decide," making Gideon chuckle as John almost spat out the coffee again. She gave her lover a mischievous grin, then

looked down at Faylinn, who had in the meantime fallen asleep on her breast. Lily swung her feet down to the floor, leaning forward to put her cup onto the table. Carefully, she unlatched her daughter and handed her to John, so she could adjust her dress.

Gideon quickly lowered his eyes to his cup. Normally, he wouldn't have been bothered by a woman baring her breasts after feeding her baby but... well, he didn't want John to think he was looking.

Suddenly, he heard Lily say, "Did you know that in ancient India the mouth was considered impure--even the sacred cow's nuzzle? The Kama Sutra says, though, 'The calf is pure when it drinks milk, the dog's mouth is pure when it seizes the game, as is also the beak of the bird that makes the fruit fall, and the mouth of a woman during the act of love.'"

Gideon's head came up abruptly, and as he looked at the redhead's earnest expression, he could feel a blush rise in his cheeks. Lily suddenly giggled mischievously, making him realize that she was teasing him. John, who had in the meantime laid Faylinn onto the easy chair beside her brother, was entirely unsuccessful in trying to suppress his grin.

Gideon narrowed his eyes. "I'd spank you if I wouldn't have to face John and Luke's wrath afterwards," he growled at the tiny redhead.

Lily said in the same low, purring voice she'd used before, "Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't mind doing it for you... would you?" She kissed John's cheek, which now had a slight blush.

Gideon shook his head and looked at Matheson, rolling his eyes. "Witches. Each as bad as the other."

"Amen to that, Sir."

Remembering the reason for his being here, Matthew turned serious again. "Well, we wanted to talk strategy. And for that I need to know everything of importance, plus all of the unimportant bits." He looked at his XO. "John? Can you tell me now what had you so terrified of this scan?"

John looked to the side for several seconds, heaving a heavy sigh, then met his friend's eyes. "Well, it's a long story which I only 'told' Lily and Luke last night." He gave Lily an apologetic smile, and she took his left hand and squeezed it encouragingly. Gideon waited until John looked at him again. "But to give you the short version, despite being only a P6, I have always been able, somehow, to hide certain things from even a deep scan, but now, that ability has gone. I only discovered I'd lost it recently, when I wanted to start practicing for today."

He paused, and Gideon asked, "Do you know what caused this? And why did that have you in such a state of panic?"

John looked at Lily again then spoke. "The cause... You know that Lily, Luke, and I sometimes 'path or share our minds, and since living on the Excalibur together we've done that a lot." He frowned, trying to find the words to explain his concerns. "Since being taken in by the Psi Corps, I was never able to open myself to anyone as I can with Lily and Luke, both emotionally and mentally. We share everything, anything."

For a moment, Gideon couldn't help but smile, as Matheson's face almost glowed with love and happiness, but then the younger man's expression turned to one of pain. "But now it seems I opened

myself so far that I can't close myself anymore." His dark eyes were wide as he whispered in a trembling voice, "I knew that if I couldn't close myself again, if I couldn't block the scan, they would find out things about my past and our mission they didn't and shouldn't know. But far worse, they'd also find out everything about the sisters' abilities, Matthew. They'd take them away from us, and our children too, and they'd experiment with them, hurt them again..." He stopped short when Lily squeezed his hand, and looked at her with a sad smile.

"But now they won't, no matter how they try," Lily said, stroking John's cheek with her free hand.

Gideon just sat there for several seconds, stricken. [God, if they tried to take Deborah and Marcus away from me...] He closed his eyes and fought down the pain that stabbed his heart at the thought, then looked at John again. "But why didn't you tell anyone?"

John sighed. "At first, I thought I was just out of practice, that I could get my ability back before Jones arrived. But gradually, I became aware that whatever I tried didn't work. So I retreated from my family." He gave Lily another sad smile. "I didn't dare tell Lily, because I didn't want her and her sisters to be scared, and you wouldn't have been able to help anyway, Matthew, not this time. So I tried to tell myself that when it came to the real situation, my blocks would come back up." Lowering his head, he murmured, "But I knew damn well that I was just fooling myself." John took a deep breath and looked up at Gideon again, silently pressing his lips together. "I'm sorry. What I did-or didn't do--was stupid."

Matthew shook his head. "Don't let yourself be brought down with 'what ifs', John. I know what I'm talking about." He gave his friend a wry grin. John smiled sadly and nodded as Gideon went on, "First thing we need to know is how they'll go about that investigation Jones mentioned. Do you have any idea?"

John leaned forward, elbows on his knees, a concentrated look on his face. "Not in detail, but I'm sure I can find out, and fill in the blanks from my knowledge about Psi Corps. While overtly things have changed, many procedures are still the same, and more importantly, many of the people running things are the same ones who were in the Corps. Most of the Joneses were Psi Cops before the rules were changed." He paused briefly, pressing his lips together, then continued, "What I do know is that there will be a group of high-rated Joneses leading the investigation, along with lower-rated telepaths who will be charged with the basic research."

Gideon looked up from his data pad as the Communications Officer turned in her chair and spoke. "You asked to be notified when we were within range of Babylon 5, Captain."

The Captain nodded and stood. "Make contact with Captain Lochley's office, and when you have her on a secure line, put the call through to the conference room." He nodded his thanks at the acknowledgment of his order, and turned to walk through to the conference room, thinking through what he needed to say to Elizabeth Lochley. It had been over eighteen months since he'd last seen her on B5, but he knew that she thought they had been together only nine months before. What Elizabeth didn't know was that it hadn't been Gideon she had seen, but Lucas Buck.

As he entered the conference room, Gideon decided that he would do his utmost to prevent Elizabeth realizing that Lucas had used her. He had no idea how far things had gone between the two of them, but whatever had happened, she didn't deserve the pain and embarrassment that knowledge would bring her. The other things Gideon had to tell her would be difficult enough; there was no need to hurt

her with facts she didn't need to know.

Gideon has been dreading this moment ever since he'd received his orders to proceed to Babylon 5 to pick up the Joneses who were coming to complete John's interrogation. He had tried to stall as long as he could, tried to buy the time he needed to get his own plans in place, but it hadn't been enough. It was bad enough that he was going to have to allow the Joneses on board, but to do so at B5, where Elizabeth was still Captain, made things doubly difficult.

The door to the conference room closed behind Gideon, and he walked across to sit on the edge of the table, facing the viewscreen as it cleared to show Elizabeth Lochley's face. Gideon smiled as he said, "Hello, Elizabeth. It's been a while."



Lochley didn't smile back. "Yes it has. It seems that you only bother to call when you want something. So what is it this time?"

Gideon tried not to flinch. This was the consequence of her experience with Lucas, as well as his own cowardice in failing to call her sooner. Well, he couldn't change any of that, so he'd better deal with it. "I wanted to let you know that we'll be arriving at B5 in thirty-eight hours. I'm sorry I haven't been in touch. Things have been a little hectic. I understand you being mad at me, you have good cause, but I didn't want to just turn up unannounced."

He watched as Lochley's face relaxed slightly. His admission of guilt had pacified her a little at least. Her next words were more conciliatory. "Hectic is an understatement from what I've heard. Finding the cure, nearly losing your ship on the way home, saving Earth, transferring from Earthforce to report directly to John Sheridan. You've had quite a year, haven't you, Matt? How does it feel to be working for your hero?" Lochley was almost smiling by the time she finished.

Gideon gave her his most charming smile back. "It feels good. The mission he's given us is worthwhile and challenging. There are a few other things you didn't mention, which I need to tell you about..." he trailed off, as Lochley interrupted him.

"Later. For now, why are you coming to B5? Supply run?"

Gideon shook his head. "I wish." He went on to explain the situation with the Joneses, pacing as he did so, concluding, "This is all my fault, Elizabeth. If I hadn't made John miss his last two scans, if I hadn't pushed for his promotion, these bastards wouldn't be getting ready to do a gang bang on his mind! It's not right. Despite what the first Jones said, they can't scan me unless they bring specific charges against me, but John has to go through having his brain raped every six months, just to prove what I know already; that he's loyal and following all the rules. God dammit, Elizabeth, there has to be a better way!"

Lochley nodded sympathetically. "I wish I could help in some way, Matt. I've only met Lieutenant Matheson briefly, but he impressed me. Do you have any idea why the first Jones couldn't scan him?" Her lips quirked into a smile. "You wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would you?"

Gideon smiled back and only answered her second question. "Hand on heart, Elizabeth, I had nothing to do with this one, but I can't say I'm sorry that Jones failed."

Lochley's smile turned into a full laugh. "And that wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that if they *do* succeed in scanning Lieutenant Matheson, they may find out some things about what *you* have been up to. Would that give them what they'd need to bring you up on charges and scan you too?"

Gideon shook his head and smiled back. "You know me too well, but in all honesty, that's not why I object to this process so much. It's an invasion of privacy. It's doing to the telepaths exactly what they're forbidden to do to us. It's not right and it's not fair, and I'm doing everything I can to stop it, but I need more time..." He trailed off into a brooding silence, depressed at his inability to protect his friend.

Lochley's voice recalled his attention. "So, I can expect a bloodhound team and some high rated telepathic interrogators to turn up at any time, can I? Wonderful. Any idea how many of them will be coming?"

Gideon shook his head. "The first one said there would be an investigation team. That's all I know, other than I have my orders to report to B5 to pick them up. I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I wish you hadn't got caught up in this. Hell, I wish we could have just disappeared off into deep space and avoided the whole thing." He shook his head sadly.

Lochley sighed deeply, then spoke. "What was your other news? You said you had some other things to tell me about?"

The moment Gideon had been dreading had arrived. He took a deep breath and launched in. "When we first..." he paused, searching for the right words, "got together, we agreed that neither of us was looking for a commitment or a long term relationship." Lochley nodded, remembering their conversation. "Well, I may not have been looking for commitment, but it came looking for me..."

Gideon sat back on the table, staring at the blank viewscreen where Elizabeth Lochley's face had been a moment before. She had taken his news about his marriage to Deborah rather better than he'd expected, insisting that she understood, and that they'd never made any commitments to each other, so if he'd met someone else and fallen in love with her, then that was OK. The only problem that Gideon could see was that he'd been deliberately vague about the timings, and he hadn't quite got around to mentioning Marcus. When Lochley found out that he and Deborah had a nine-month old son, she might not be quite so understanding.

[Oh well. I'll tackle that one when we get to B5.] Gideon glanced at the clock on the wall of the conference room. Another hour and he'd be off duty and could finish the game of chess he'd been playing with Deborah for the last four days. He'd worked out what he planned to do next and thought he could checkmate her in another three moves. Gideon smiled lasciviously, as he thought about what Deborah had promised to give him as a prize if he won.

To say that Gideon was not in a good mood would have been a serious understatement. He'd just had a very curt talk with the leader of the telepathic investigators who would be coming aboard to investigate the happenings during the visit of the last Mr. Jones. She and her team were already on B5, where the Excalibur had just arrived.

Matthew felt sick after what that woman had told him. Abruptly he stood, starting to pace the conference room, letting the Universe know what exactly the Joneses, and in particular that bitch he'd just talked to, could do with their investigation. Gideon stopped in mid-invective when his eyes fell on John Matheson, who stood next to the door in a rigid posture, with his head lowered and hands clasped behind his back, looking like the personification of guilt.

Gideon closed his eyes and took a deep breath, forcing his anger down before he looked at his telepathic First Officer again. [Get a grip, Matt! This isn't about you!] Aloud he said, "John, I'm sorry. This isn't your fault, or Lily's. It's just that the thought of so many of those double-talking scum infesting my ship..." He sighed. "If anyone's to blame, it's me. If I hadn't made you miss your last two inspections..."

John looked up abruptly, his voice soft as he interrupted. "I guess the point is moot now, Sir. What happened, happened. I only hope that Lily will be able..." His usually stoic face showed how much the message from Ms. Jones had rattled him.

"I'm sure Lily didn't exaggerate when she told us she could blanket the whole ship," Gideon said, smiling encouragingly, then he snorted a laugh. "Well, we sure managed to get their attention! They must have diverted dozens of personnel from other missions. I can't imagine how else this incident could end up with the dubious honor of rating 104 bloodhounds!"

Matthew paused, then grinned wickedly. "If I kill three of them and we paint the rest white with black spots...OK, not funny." He ignored Matheson's expression, half shocked, half amused, and continued, "How unfortunate that we won't be able to offer all of them accommodation on the Excalibur." He gave John a sarcastic grin. "I trust you'll find adequate quarters for their leaders, of course."

Gideon could see John was recovering his composure as he answered, "Of course, Sir. I'm afraid, though, that we only have quarters with minimal hygiene facilities available."

"What a shame. Well, nothing we can do about that before their arrival in," he looked at the clock, "fifty-four minutes." He nodded at John, flashing a wolfish grin. "Proceed according to plan A, Lieutenant. Let me know when they're ready to board--we want to receive them in style."

"Aye Sir." Matheson nodded smartly and turned around to leave the conference room, but hesitated as he stood inside the open door, looking back at his Captain. "Matthew?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

These two words were filled with so much meaning and emotion that the only reply Gideon could think of was to smile and nod.

John briefly smiled back, then left to prepare everything for the Joneses' arrival.

The smile left Matthew's face as the doors closed behind his XO and friend, and again he sighed, sending a silent prayer to a God he didn't really believe in. [This is not for me, but for John. He's a good man who deserves some happiness after all he went through, so please help us during the coming week.] He lifted his arm and called Deborah on his wristband communicator.

Lily couldn't suppress a giggle, causing John and Luke to look at her wide-eyed. They were in the bullet car, heading toward the landing bay, where the first shuttle with the telepathic investigators sent by the Bureau of Telepath Integration would arrive soon. In their last 'war council', Matthew, John, Luke, Lily and her sisters had agreed that to welcome the four Joneses leading the investigation of the mysterious goings-on during John's last inspection, not only would the whole command crew of the Excalibur be present, but also John's complete extended family. This was against every protocol, which they hoped would unsettle the Joneses even more after having got into range of Lily's telepathic block.

Lily had been 'watching' for any pre-emptive strikes by the investigation team since the Excalibur had arrived at Babylon 5, but it seemed they were sticking to the rules for now, since she hadn't noticed any secret attempts at scanning. John had informed her as soon as the shuttle with the four Joneses had left B5. The first time she'd sensed them reach out with their minds inside the two kilometer threshold they'd agreed on for this day, she'd activated her block, making it seem as if whatever caused the block reacted to the presence of more than one telepath within a certain range in and around the Excalibur.

After a moment of what must have been shocked silence, she'd felt their minds' frantic probing. Lily had felt Demon and Angel's amusement through their link before they withdrew gently. Her sisters had merged with her as a precaution, to make up for the missing energy field, which had supported and nourished their powers on Eriadne. Fortunately, they didn't need to keep up the link all the time, as they had done when Lucas Buck had come back to Eriadne to kidnap Demon. They hadn't known exactly how his powers worked, so Lily had needed to block the whole spectrum. Human telepathy worked on a very narrow band inside that spectrum, which made it easy for her to detect and block it without using too much energy.

"They're constantly trying to get through my block. If they don't stop it, they'll give themselves a brain hemorrhage before the investigation even gets started," Lily explained, her voice light.

John's concern clearly showed in his voice when he asked, "Are you sure that you'll be OK? With so many of them..."

Lily smiled up at him. "I'm fine, Sweet Face. The number doesn't matter. They're far too weak and too unfocused. And if I should get tired, the coven will replenish me." The bullet car stopped, and they got out and walked down the corridor, Lily carrying Faylinn in a sling while Luke carried Dasha the same way.

"Oh great," Luke commented, "A full blown witches' coven in our quarters, and that regularly?" He yelped, "Ouch!" when Lily elbowed him, very lightly.

"Don't worry, we won't turn you two into toads--not permanently, at least. But maybe for a little while if you don't behave." Lily stopped a few steps short of the landing bay doors, to turn and sweetly smile up at her men, then hooked her arm through John's and looked at him reassuringly. "Don't worry, everything will be all right. I know my powers and their limits. The Joneses won't be able to keep up with me," she said, with conviction.

"No one could, not by a far cry." John finally smiled and leaned down to kiss her softly, then drew his partners into a quick, warm embrace, careful not to crush the sleeping twins between them. "I love you," he whispered softly.

The small group emerging from the landing bay obviously didn't feel very comfortable about not being

able to sense anything. All four of them eyed the mixed group of military personnel and civilians awaiting them, especially the children.

Three men followed the woman who was leading the investigation, as Lily already knew. The female Jones was slightly taller than Angel, wearing her black hair in a bun, while a few free strands framed her delicate Latino features. She looked too young for such a job, too soft and sweet with her dark brown eyes, but that probably was just the reason why she'd been chosen. And of course she had a quite spectacular figure, which was clad not in the usual Jones garb her male companions wore, but in a figure-hugging suit that looked like it was made of black leather. While the jacket didn't quite offer a glimpse of her cleavage, it was tight enough to enhance the prominent swelling of her breasts.

She gave Gideon a curt nod and greeting, as he 'welcomed' them to the Excalibur, handing him a data crystal. "These are your orders and the legal warrant we need for this investigation. You and your crew are required to cooperate with us, and to provide any information or help we request," Ms. Jones said in a melodious voice, then turned to the three men accompanying her. "These are my associates."



They were three very diverse men. The oldest of them, probably around sixty but looking very fit, seemed to be an American Indian. A long scar ran from the middle of his forehead down to his right eyebrow. He wore his graying black hair in two braids, eyes glittering with what seemed to be amusement, as he studied the civilians casually assembled at John's right side, while the Excalibur's command crew stood at attention on his left.

The second Jones had shoulder-length soft brown hair and slightly tanned skin, a long nose in his handsome face, and he held himself proudly, almost like Royalty. [Or someone who knows he looks good.] Lily could see his frustration at not being able to sense anything, in the rigid expression on his face.

Suddenly, she noticed Gideon's wolfish grin when he looked at the third Mr. Jones. "Well, well, well, the universe is a small place indeed. Looks like you missed the excitement of your last trip on the Excalibur so much that you just had to come back, Mr. Jones."

"I was chosen by the Bureau of Telepath Integration to participate in this investigation. I'm sure they had their reasons, Captain Gideon," the blond man with the beard and mustache answered, unsuccessfully trying to hide his discomfort at being singled out.

Lily looked up at John questioningly. He nodded. [So this is the one who was on the ship when they went to look for the Well of Forever. Good to know.]

"Well Ms. Jones, Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones, Mr... Oh to hell with that, I'm just going to call you all Joneses and I'm telling everyone else on board to do the same. If you don't like it--tough." Gideon gave the four telepathic investigators a challenging look.

Ms. Jones smiled coolly at the Captain and said, very politely, "We don't care what you call us, as long as we have your cooperation."

"We'll follow our orders from President Sheridan, of course," Gideon replied, "But before we go to the conference room to discuss the details, let me introduce the people you'll be meeting regularly during your investigation. I'm sure those of you who haven't met him yet have read Lt. Matheson's file." He gestured towards his First Officer.

John nodded and said with his most earnest butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth expression, "Joneses."

"And may I introduce to you his partners, Lilith Morgaine and Dr. Luke Raven, our Chief Medical Officer, and their children, Faylinn and Dasha."

Since Lily was officially on board as Luke's partner, they had long since discussed if they should try and keep their triad with John a secret, but Luke had pointed out that no one could mistake Dasha for anyone but John's son. "Sometimes, being open about something can be a much better tool than hiding it," Lily had added, "This gives the Joneses one less weapon to use against John, one less secret to exploit. Neither Luke nor I are in the military, so no one can blame John for having a relationship with us, as it's based on mutual consent."

John had added, "Besides, the Psi Corps always frowned upon relationships with 'mundanes', and many telepaths still have that attitude." He'd grinned at Lily and Luke. "So being open about our relationship will be another way to anger and unsettle them, distracting them from the investigation."

With that thought, Lily gave the telepathic investigators her most cheerful smile, as she greeted them with "Joneses," echoed by Luke. Ms. Jones' eyes scrutinized her especially thoroughly, no doubt surprised at the revelation, while at the same time trying to assess the potential threat. Again, Lily could feel the useless probing against her block. An elegant eyebrow rose almost imperceptibly when Ms. Jones noticed the sleeping baby Luke was carrying, obviously concluding that it had to be John's. [Oh no, you won't get Dasha in your clutches, not now, not ever.] Lily thought at her, still smiling. The blond Jones merely gave the threesome and their children a passing look, heavy with disapproval, but the brown-haired one more than made up for that, as his eyes lingered on Lily. The American Indian's nod as he walked past her and Luke almost seemed respectful. [Interesting.]

Gideon next introduced Angel, Demon and Marcus, who started to cry as soon as he looked at Ms. Jones. Gideon quickly led her and her associates off to meet his command crew, where he continued his introductions, while Demon comforted their son.

[[Have you seen how she looked at us? She may not show it, but she doesn't like the competition. What a bitch,]] Angel sent through the link. *[[Marcus seems to have figured her out immediately.]]*

[[It's very clear what Boss Bitch is trying to achieve with her looks, her outfit, and her behavior,]] Lily replied, *[[But fortunately our men won't fall for that. Nonetheless, we'll have to watch her closely. All of them.]]*

[[We'll keep our eyes open for any weaknesses we may be able to exploit,]] Demon added. *[[That brown-haired Jones certainly likes you, Lily, I could feel his lust even over Marcus' crying.]]*

[[Fortunately, Faylinn was covering my cleavage, or I'd have had to fish his eyes out of it. But that suits me fine. I haven't toyed with a man for sooo long.]] Lily gave her sisters the mental equivalent of an evil grin. *[[By the time we're done with them, the Joneses and their bloodhounds will wish they'd never have set foot on the Excalibur.]]*

"The investigation will take four approaches," Ms. Jones explained in her melodious voice, leaning back in her chair next to Gideon, in a deceptively relaxed and harmless posture, arms resting on the chair's armrests and legs crossed. The three male Joneses sat to her left, while Gideon separated the Joneses from his command crew, who sat to his right.

"First, we will question every single sentient being on this ship. We may require the services of your linguist in some cases," Ms. Jones looked at Dunall, "and I'd like to advise you right now that every single conversation will be recorded, and that we will check on the accuracy of the translation once we're back at the headquarters."

"Are you suggesting that that I would deliberately mistranslate?" Dunall lifted her head imperiously, looking down her nose at Ms. Jones, in the way that only a Minbari could. Gideon had discovered that his Head of Linguistics had taken self-defense training at one time. Ms. Jones might not know it, but she was in danger of having a Denn'bok inserted somewhere she wouldn't enjoy.

"I'm sorry if you interpreted my words in that way, but it's my duty to point out the consequences of any insubordination in this matter." The female Jones gave Dunall an apologetic smile, then looked at Gideon.

"Second--a device has recently been developed which can detect traces of telepathy. We are not allowed to explain to you exactly how it works, so don't ask, but I can tell you that it won't be hampered by that block." She gave Gideon and then Matheson a significant look, but neither of them batted an eyelid, and she continued, "One group of our investigators will use these devices to search the ship. Third--another group will use the Excalibur's blueprints," she picked up a data crystal from the table and held it up like a precious gem, "to ensure that every single wire and screw in this ship is where it should be, and that no devices whatsoever have been installed which could be causing this block."

"They'll WHAT?" Gideon gave Ms. Jones a narrow-eyed glare, feeling his temper rise. "No one except my crew will mess around with my ship..."

"You're right, Captain," Jones interrupted him, smiling amiably, "They won't, because your mechanics and engineers will do that, supervised by twenty-five competent members of our investigation team."

Gideon clenched his teeth as he digested that, continuing to glare at the female telepath. "Your competent team members better be competent at keeping their hands to themselves and not getting in the way of my crew," he finally said between clenched teeth. "And fourth?"

"Fourth--we will require access to one of the medical laboratories on the Excalibur." Ms. Jones turned to look at Luke Raven. "We'll need to take blood samples of everyone on the Excalibur, to test for any viruses or similar agents which could cause this block. It might be very unlikely, but the galaxy is a big place. You could have unsuspectingly picked up something that your sensors weren't able to detect."

"Of course," Luke said, "I'll prepare everything necessary."

"Thank you." The female Jones smiled at Luke then looked at the Captain again. "You will find the details on the data crystal I gave you, along with your orders from President Sheridan."

"Fine," Matthew said, "I guess you'll want to brief your teams while we pore over our orders?" Ms. Jones nodded, so he looked at his Second Officer. "Lt. Jackson, would you please show the Joneses to their quarters, and then escort them to the landing bay where they can meet up with their

bloodhound... I'm sorry, *investigator* teams." He turned to face the four Joneses again. "I'm afraid we're a little short on accommodation suitable for humans right now. As you know, we refitted last year to allow us to carry a significant number of other ISA races. So we won't be able to provide five star boarding, but I can assure you that all your basic needs will be taken care of." He gave them a wide smile. "We won't have to ask you to bunk with the Pak'ma'ra."

"I'm sure we'll make do. Thank you, Captain," Ms. Jones replied in her melodious voice, then she and her male associates, who'd remained silent during the whole meeting, got up and followed Lt. Jackson out of the conference room.

Gideon watched them go, for a moment giving serious consideration to rearranging the accommodations after all. Then he decided it would be unfair to the Pak'ma'ra. They at least waited for their victims to die before they ate them. [And a few days more for good measure.] The Joneses liked to eat their victims alive.

January 13th 2070 - Day 1 of the Jones investigation - early evening

Ines León leaned back against the wall and looked over the investigation team, tightly packed into the mess hall that Captain Gideon had allocated them for their meetings. None of them were unaffected by the block. The higher their P-rating, the more they were affected. Ines felt as if she were missing a limb, or was half blind, but she didn't show it. Some of the investigators were obviously uncomfortable, while others covered up their feelings better. Half of the investigation team was finished for the day and were no doubt relieved that they could return to their quarters on Babylon 5 after this meeting. The other half would then take over for the night shift. It was better to work in two shifts. That way they could keep the investigation going twenty-four hours a day, and that wouldn't give any respite to whoever was responsible for that mysterious block. That in turn might cause them to make an error or give themselves away.

The mess hall was small and looked as if it hadn't been used or cleaned in a while. [But if the reports about Matheson's thoroughness and perfectionism are true, I can't imagine him allowing any room to be neglected like this--unless it's deliberate. Well, I'm used to such treatment, and I've survived worse. He and his 'friends' will find that their silly attempts at unsettling us won't help them. Whether we can use our ability or not, we'll find out what they've done to block us, and they'll pay.] Inwardly, Ines allowed herself a tiny malicious grin, but her face showed no expression, as she listened to the last of her associates' reports, from Jules Deneuve, who was in charge of the medical tests.

When he had finished, she pushed herself away from the wall and walked to the middle of the room, looking up at the opposite wall as she spoke. "So, to sum up the first day of our investigation, so far, we didn't find anything useful." Everybody nodded or murmured their agreement. "Very well. I didn't expect us to be that lucky."

Before dismissing the investigators, she reminded them to keep *all* their senses alert, even if they were telepathically blocked right now. "The slightest change in the block could give us a hint as to its source, so I expect you to report everything--and I do mean everything--to your group leaders." She nodded for the investigators to leave, and after the door had closed behind the last one, turned to her associates who had remained. "Anything else?"

Jules shook his head. "The Medbay staff has been most forthcoming, helping us to get settled and

prepared for the tests. Their CMO doesn't give the impression of being overly concerned about his..." An amused smile appeared on his lips as he looked into Ines' eyes, "lover's future." His intonation was softened by a slight French accent, though Ines knew that he could speak perfectly accent-less English. [Jules probably thinks his accent and his soft, long hair give him an edge dealing with women. Well, that may be true with others, but not me.]

Ines chose to ignore his remark--for now--and quickly recited the information she had memorized from the command crew's personnel files. "Dr. Luke Raven. Used to work in an ER on Deneb IV, but quit and opened a general practice after his parents died in a traffic accident in 2266. Temporary replacement on the Excalibur for Dr. Sarah Chambers in 2268, then returned when she left for Geneva, after she found the cure. Except for what we know about his medical expertise, he's an unknown quantity." She smiled, coolly. "I'll enjoy filling some of the blanks when I question him."

Her eyes moved to Reginald Jones, who led the search for a blocking device in the Excalibur's bowels, going over all the engineering blueprints and schematics. He simply shook his head, looking just as glum as he had since they'd arrived. [And not because of the block,] Ines thought.

"Well, *Reggie*, you don't seem to be enjoying your return to the Excalibur very much. What's the matter?"

Ines could see his blue eyes narrow at the unloved nickname, but he only said, "You'll understand after we've finished the investigation." Reginald gave her a defiant look, making Ines wonder once again what had happened when he had visited the Excalibur the first time. She'd read his report about that visit, in preparation for this investigation, along with all others about the probing scans conducted on John Matheson since he'd joined Earth Force. Reginald's report didn't sound quite right. She couldn't pin it down, but she'd got the feeling that something unusual must have happened. After hearing the little exchange between the Captain and *Reggie* in landing bay, Ines intended to find out what. But not now.

"Alden? Anything?" She asked the oldest of her associates. She had never before worked with Alden Catches, and didn't know a lot about him, except that he showed his heritage proudly--[Foolish! We're telepaths, above and beyond all!]-and that he was very quiet and reserved. As far as she knew, he was the strongest telepath among them. [Which is probably the reason why his personnel files didn't contain a lot of information.] Ines couldn't say she was thrilled about this unknown quantity in their midst, but that was what she'd been given to work with by her superiors. She had decided to assign him to lead the team using the new device that could detect telepathic impulses. Ines wanted to lead the most important task of the investigation, the questioning of the crew, herself. She was especially looking forward to personally interrogating the Excalibur's command crew.

"No more than I already reported," Alden replied.

Nodding, Ines clasped her hands behind her back. "I won't repeat what I told the *investigators*." They would always be 'bloodhounds' to her, no matter how many new names they were given, because that exactly described what they did. The four of them in this room had to give those bloodhounds guidance. "Be attentive. If we fail in this investigation..." She trailed off, leaving her associates to imagine the possible consequences, as she looked from one to the other. "Dismissed."

January 13th 2070 - Day 1 of the Jones investigation - later that evening

Luke leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with mischief as he said, "Oh, we were so cooperative that French Jones seemed to think he was in the wrong movie!"

They were all sitting around the table in Lily, John and Luke's quarters, reviewing the first day of the Jones investigation. While the "blueprinters", and the group with the telepathy detecting devices, had already started their part of the investigation, and a third group of bloodhounds--[That's what they still are, no matter what they call them,] Luke thought--had started the questioning of the Excalibur's crew members, Ms. Jones herself hadn't been able to interview the command crew yet. There had been too many things to organize on this first day.

Ms. Jones had also been present in Medbay for a while in the morning, along with the brown-haired Jones who had a French accent--hence his nickname--but she had left after a while to oversee the group questioning the crew. Angel's grimace, after Ms. Jones left, had nearly doubled Luke over, but he'd had to suppress his laughter because French Jones had been explaining something.

Luke grinned widely and added, looking at Angel, "Your performance was worth an Academy Award!" He knew that Demon's younger sister was still uncomfortable around Gideon, but she was aware that these meetings were vitally important now, and she had vehemently assured Lily that she would do anything to help John against the Joneses. [And I'm sure, at least in part, Angel still feels she owes John because Lucas shot him.]

Luke was glad that Angel didn't let her feelings influence her sense of humor, as she assumed a regal expression and bowed her head slightly. "Thank you, kind Sir. But I must say, you didn't do too badly, either."

Lily laughed. "I think I'll have to come visit you two sometime. Sounds like better entertainment than most things on TV."

Luke sobered slightly. "You'll be asked to visit Medbay for the tests soon, anyway. I don't know what they're looking for, but I have a suspicion it's not just viruses." He frowned and gave Lily a worried look. "Your mutation of the telepath gene might be close enough to the 'real thing' for them to notice."

When Luke had tested Dasha for the telepath gene, shortly after the Excalibur had left Mars for their new mission, he'd also tested Lily, as they wanted to find the source of her blocking ability. She didn't possess the telepath gene, but she did have a minimal, and as far as Luke was able to tell, at least partly natural mutation of it. The mutation seemed to be enough to keep her from sending, as a result she could only block--but she could do that with extraordinary strength, probably due to further genetic meddling by the Vorlons.

John had removed all evidence of the tests from the Excalibur's computers, after copying everything onto a data crystal. Then he'd split, manipulated and encrypted the files so they were virtually invisible, attached piggyback to the movies that were recorded on that crystal. Only a very specific procedure would allow someone to find and rebuild the data.

Lily nodded. "If they test us, they may notice that Angel, Demon and I have been genetically altered, which would raise a lot of unwanted questions." She looked at her sisters across the table, then at the twins. Faylinn was propped up in her baby seat between Lily and John, while Dasha sat between John and Luke. "Our children must have inherited at least some of our altered genes. We can't take the risk of the Joneses noticing anything."

Demon gently stroked her son's golden curls, as he sat between her and Angel. "Even if Marcus and I don't have the telepath gene, empathy may be close enough for them to find something. And telekinesis even more so." She raised her eyes to look at Angel over Marcus' head.

The raven-haired witch grinned wickedly. "I guess the Joneses will find that we won't agree to have ourselves or the children tested, then." She looked across the table at John. "I don't know if I've got this right, but I think since we're private citizens, they can't force us to participate in the tests?"

John frowned in concentration as he thought about this for a moment. "Not with the warrant they have," he said. "It doesn't specifically state that it covers civilians on board the Excalibur. While you're a member of the crew, your status is special, because you're a private consultant, just like Luke. Besides," he grinned, "When I set up the IDs for you and your sisters, I set up complete medical records too, including test results that show you don't have the telepath gene." He looked at Raven. "If the Joneses say they want to test our ladies, you can tell them to go look at the records."

"Frog Boy won't like that," Demon murmured, answering the questioning looks of the other adults round the table with a shrug and an innocent expression. "It's not my fault if the French have strange tastes."

Everybody laughed except Gideon, who had so far been listening silently from where he sat on the opposite side of the table to Luke. He now leaned forward, asking Luke, "So did I get that right? Mr. Jones refused to tell you exactly what tests they want to conduct?"

Luke nodded. "That's right."

Matthew's eyes narrowed, and one of his wolfish grins slowly spread across his face.

Luke knew the Joneses were in deep trouble now.

January 14th 2070 - Day 2 of the Jones Investigation - late morning

"Captain Gideon," Ines León forced herself to stay calm, although this son of a bitch was really beginning to irk her. Jules Deneuve had called in the middle of Ines' interview with the ship's Minbari linguist, Dunall, saying that there was 'a problem' in Medbay, which she was needed to attend to, personally. When she'd arrived, Ines had found Jules and Gideon standing in the middle of Medbay, staring each other down and looking as if they were ready to strangle the other. Raven was telling them to stop shouting, as they were disturbing his patients.

Ines had been acutely aware of everyone in Medbay watching them, so after Jules had told her what 'the problem' was, she'd tried to handle it as quickly and quietly as possible. It seemed the Excalibur's Captain was looking for a confrontation, and his CMO was refusing to get involved, saying he had to follow Gideon's orders. Ines took another deep breath, clenching her hands at the small of her back. "You have direct orders from both Earth Gov and President Sheridan to cooperate with this investigation in any..."

Gideon interrupted. "And I will, as soon as you give Dr. Raven a detailed written description of every single test you want to conduct on my crew. *And* as soon as you accept that he, or another qualified member of his team, will witness and supervise these tests. Just to make sure you don't do anything

you haven't told us about."

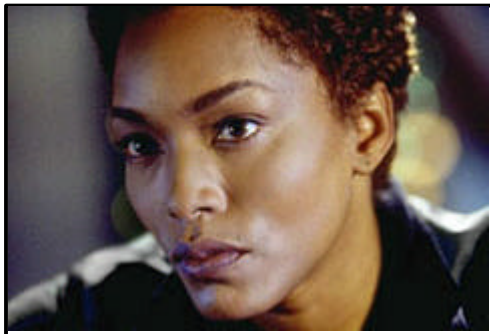
"You don't have the right..." Jules inserted from behind her, but was immediately cut off by Gideon, who glared at him with narrowed eyes.

"We," Gideon took in the people in Medbay with a sweeping gesture of his arm, "have every right to know what tests you'll be conducting on us. We're not guinea pigs, like they used for testing in Earth labs centuries ago." He turned and locked his eyes with León's, adding in a low voice, "You either agree to my conditions, or there won't be any medical tests. I'm willing to pursue this to President Sheridan and Earth Gov, and I'm in no hurry to conclude this investigation." With that, Gideon turned and walked out of Medbay, leaving Ines and Jules to ponder his unspoken threat that he could string things out for longer than their superiors would tolerate.

Ines had to make an effort to unclench her jaw before she could speak. "Team leader meeting, fifteen minutes *sharp*." Before Jules could acknowledge her order, she had left Medbay. [You may have won the battle, Gideon, but not the war. Not by a long shot.]

January 15th 2070 - Day 3 of the Jones investigation - morning

John had decided to take advantage of the Excalibur's downtime at Babylon 5 to take Lt. Jackson through some emergency simulations. She had reacted well during the Drakh attack on their way back to Earth with the cure, which in addition to her excellent performance at everyday tasks had confirmed to him that she would make an excellent second officer. But John wanted to make sure that she would also be able to handle dangerous situations independently, without a superior officer present to give her orders.



Jackson had just finished her first simulation, and John was in the conference room with her, discussing the results. John stood beside the screen while the Excalibur's new Second Officer sat at the conference table, making an effort not to show her disappointment at her less than stellar performance. As she let her head drop for a moment, John couldn't prevent the corners of his mouth twitching, as he remembered when he had been in a very similar situation. Gideon had paced the conference room of the EAS Phoenix, haranguing John. He decided to take mercy on Jackson. "Actually, you didn't do too badly. You were better than I was, when Gideon first put me through this particular test."

Jackson looked up at him wide-eyed. "You?" Her eyes widened even more as comprehension set in. Her mouth moved without a sound, as she continued to stare at him, then she snapped it shut, shaking her head and laughing nervously, while giving him an accusatory glare. Finally, she relaxed slightly.

John grinned as he sat down and explained, "I ran this simulation at the most difficult level, not the easiest one, as you believed. And no, I didn't lie," John interrupted when Jackson opened her mouth to protest, "I just didn't contradict your assumption that we'd start easy and work our way up." His grin widened slightly. "All part of the learning experience."

Jackson blew out her breath, staring at the screen, then looked back at him. "Well, you certainly seem

to have learned a lot from Captain Gideon. I thought after this disaster," she gestured at the screen, "I'd be downgraded or even dishonorably discharged."

"So did I back then, but now you can look forward to the other simulations more calmly." He raised an eyebrow. "Just don't think they're a piece of cake. Every one of them has its stumbling blocks, and they're slightly different every time they run, throwing new spanners in the works at random."

Jackson nodded earnestly, and they went back to analyzing the results again, this time allowing for the correct level of difficulty. Suddenly, a voice snarled from behind them, "Where's your Captain?"

Jackson and Matheson both turned to see Ms. Jones standing in the open door to the conference room, her face a mask. John could see the cold anger simmering inside her eyes, as they focused on him. "Your communications officer refused to put me through to him."

[And you're not used to being refused anything, are you?] Remaining seated, John replied, "We know better than to disturb our Captain on one of his rare days off. He tends to react very badly to such interruptions since he got married. But you can leave a message with me, if you wish."

Ms. Jones glowered at him for a long moment, then spat out, "Tell him that Dr. Raven will have his test descriptions by tomorrow morning, and we will accept that Raven or one of his team members will be present at all stages of the tests." It seemed as if she was almost choking on the words.

John bowed his head in acknowledgment. "I'm sure the Captain will be glad to hear that."

If looks could kill, Lt. Jackson would have set a new record for the quickest promotion from Second Officer to First, in barely three months.

"That woman has a really bad attitude problem," Jackson remarked dryly, as they watched Ms. Jones storm off.

January 15th 2070 - Day 3 of the Jones investigation -- at the same time elsewhere on the ship

"Are you sure you two are going to be all right?" Demon looked at Matthew, who was holding Marcus against his shoulder.

"We'll be just fine. You go on and have fun with your sisters, and leave me holding the baby. I'll deal with the diapers." He gave a martyred sigh then grinned, "Just don't hurt any of my crew." With his free hand, he reached for Demon's right hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing it lightly. "And don't cut your hands. I don't want you having to wear one of Luke's black gloves again. I love what you do with your hands too much."

Demon gave Matthew a naughty grin, making him groan as she lightly covered his groin with her left hand. In a husky voice she replied, "Don't worry, darling. I'll give you a little hands on attention when I *come* home..." She squeezed his balls lightly, drawing a louder groan from him, then let go and stepped back, lifting her bag off the couch. She turned inside the open door, kissing her son and Matthew one last time, before leaving for the gym.

Matt stood outside the door, watching Deborah walk down the corridor, hips swaying. The skin-tight cat-suit she was wearing clearly displayed her spectacular figure. He sighed, looking down at his son who was busy studying their surroundings over his shoulder. "I really don't know why you wanted to come out of her. I'd stay inside her all the time, if I could."

Grinning, he turned around to go back into their quarters, but stopped as he noticed an 'old friend' further down the corridor, in the opposite direction to that which Deborah had taken. Apparently, the blond Mr. Jones was supervising the investigators who had opened several panels in the wall along that section of the corridor, to check that the wiring behind it was exactly as it should be according to the blueprints. The crew mechanic who was with them didn't take his eyes off what they were doing for a second. [Good!]

"Want do you think? Shall we have some fun?" Gideon asked Marcus, but when he looked at his son, he saw that the boy's eyes were half closed and his head now rested heavily against his father's shoulder. "Oh well, at least if you sleep, you can't tell your Mommy what a bad boy Daddy was, while she was away."

Raising his voice enough to be heard, but not so much as to disturb his son, he called out, "Mr. Jones?"

Jones looked up, his face darkening when he saw who had called him.

"If you could loan me a few minutes of your precious time..." Gideon trailed off, stopping his grin just short of a sneer.

Jones gave him a suspicious look, then spoke softly to one of the investigators beside him. "Captain?" He asked coolly, his blue eyes looking at Gideon defiantly.

"Please, do come in. I don't want you to get the impression that I'm a bad host." Matt stood aside to let the telepath enter his quarters, before following him inside. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I have to put my son to bed. This will only take a moment." Leaving the slightly baffled Mr. Jones standing in the living room, he carried Marcus into the bedroom, pulling the screen closed behind him.

It was a very long moment later, when Gideon finally went back into the living room, walking straight toward Jones, who was still standing where he'd left him, making an effort not to show his nervousness.

"Captain, as you mentioned yourself, my time *is* precious, so..."

Matt didn't react, he just kept walking, forcing Jones to retreat from him, until the telepath's back hit the wall, and the two men stood nose to nose. Before Jones could protest, Gideon snarled, "Well, surprise, surprise, surprise. And I thought I'd never see your sorry face again. You seem to have masochistic tendencies, Mr. Jones. Didn't you get enough the last time you were on the Excalibur?"

"I was *ordered*..."

"And a good soldier always does what his superiors tell him, right? Well, I don't give a damn how and why you came back. But I know that if you don't see to it that this farce ends quickly, your superiors will find a report on their desks about certain events during your last visit. Starting with Ms. Jones."

The Captain had anticipated a number of reactions, but not what he got. Jones laughed, but in his eyes, Gideon could see faint fear.

"Even if I wanted to, I couldn't end this investigation. I'm not the one who calls the shots here." The blond telepath snorted. "Ms. Jones may call us her associates, but in reality she sees and uses us as her servants, as her means to achieve whatever end she wants. I'd rather you disclosed your information about me, than incur *her* displeasure!"

Demon smiled at G'Tan as she entered the gym. The leader of the Narn Marines had promised to show the sisters some new knife throwing techniques during their practice session that morning. As Demon walked across to greet the Narn, the group of men working in the corner of the gym caught her attention. [Bloodhounds!] There were five of them, all carefully watching three Excalibur technicians dismantling a wall panel. The bloodhounds were sneezing intermittently.

G'Tan winked at Demon as she drew near, whispering, "The bloodhounds do not seem to have any experience of Gaim mating pheromones." He nodded toward the Gaim who led the group of Excalibur crew. "And the doctor seems to have neglected to advise them to take the appropriate antihistamines."

Demon gave him a wicked grin and lowered her voice as she replied, "It's a good job that everyone on the crew has taken his or her medicine. It would be terribly unfortunate if a large dose of the Gaim pheromones were somehow to get into the ship's air supply, wouldn't it?" G'Tan's grin was even more evil than Demon's, as he agreed with her. Demon was sure that the bloodhounds were in for the worst case of hay fever they had ever suffered in their lives. She hoped for their sakes that B5 was well stocked with tissues, as she was absolutely certain that Matthew would insist that the Excalibur was all out.

Carefully setting her bag on the floor, Demon pulled out a small case, which she opened and showed to G'Tan. "While we're waiting for Lily and Angel, here are the knives I was telling you about." She handed G'Tan one of the pair of slender steel knives.

The large Narn sucked in his breath in appreciation, holding the knife to the light and testing the edge lightly with his thumb. "Brakiri, aren't they?" he asked.

Demon nodded. "A gift from a friend." She ran her finger lightly along the flat of the other blade, remembering when her friend, Nikarran, had given her the knives. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the memories aside and smiled at G'Tan. "They're the best throwing knives I've ever had. Watch."

She spun on her heel and flicked the knife out of her hand, toward the target dummy, which stood about five meters away. The knife was a blur in the air, then it stood straight out from the center of the bull's-eye painted over the dummy's heart.

G'Tan nodded, saying, "Impressive," then flicked the matching knife toward the target. The silver flash was barely visible, but a split second later, the knife pierced one of the dummy's painted eyes. "The balance is superb." The Narn walked to the dummy and retrieved both knives, returning to Demon's side, as Lily and Angel entered the gym, laughing to each other.

After a round of greetings, they settled down to their practice session, with G'Tan first inspecting the knives Angel and Lily were using. He approved Lily's dagger, but expressed some concern about the

balance of Angel's stiletto.

"Oh, I can handle it! Here, let me show you." The stiletto spun out of Angel's hand and hit the dummy deep in the groin. "Oops!" Angel grinned round at her sisters. "I think that could be called a low blow."

By this time, Demon was well aware that the bloodhound unit, human males all, were no longer watching the Excalibur technicians, but had their attention firmly fixed on the sisters. Demon smiled to herself. She had no doubt that her own figure-hugging black cat-suit was partially responsible for that attention, but since Angel and Lily had arrived, she knew that she had hardly merited a glance.

Angel's red T-shirt barely covered her breasts. It was cut low above and high below, displaying a generous amount of cleavage and leaving her midriff completely bare. The skintight leather pants were cut low across the hips, giving onlookers a generous view of Angel's flat belly and oval navel.

Lily's outfit was less revealing everywhere but in the cleavage. If possible, her dress was cut lower than Angel's, displaying her snake tattoo in all its glory, and barely covering her nipples. That covering was pretty much irrelevant anyway, as Lily's nipples stood out against the material of her dress, making it clear that she was excited. Knives had that effect on Lily.

G'Tan retrieved Angel's knife and returned it to her. "Tsk tsk, you'll have to do better than that, Ms. Denier. Now ladies, try this."

The Narn showed the three sisters a slightly different way of holding their knives. All three threw together. All three knives hit the target in the groin.

Demon muttered, "It looks like it just finished fucking a porcupine," causing Angel and Lily to splutter with raucous laughter, and G'Tan to look puzzled.

"Porcupine? Now ladies, you have to do better than this. Castrating your enemy is one way of stopping them, but aiming in that area will only work on humans, Brakiri and Narn. Drazi, for example, keep their genitals in an entirely different place."

G'Tan spent the next ten minutes instructing the sisters in the anatomical location of the male genitals, or nearest equivalent, for every species in the ISA. Within half an hour the sisters were loudly celebrating their ability to castrate every variety of male in known space.

Demon glanced across at the bloodhounds. They were still watching the sisters, but for some reason, all five men had their hands cupped over their groins and their legs crossed.

They were just about to finish their practice session, when from the corner of her eye, Lily saw someone enter the gym and walk toward the bloodhound team. They immediately scrambled back to their work. When she saw who the newcomer was, Lily growled softly.

"What is it?" Angel whispered, looking curiously at her red-haired sister.

"That one--he's been here before. If it wasn't for Matthew, this Jones would have succeeded in having John thrown out of Earthforce. And just because John hadn't been able to completely block the emotions of an alien, when he had to project into the alien's mind in self-defense."

They couldn't hear what the blond Jones said, but it seemed he was quite cross with his team. To put it mildly.

"I suspected it was him from the way Matthew greeted him in the landing bay," Demon murmured in a low voice, then gave Lily a wicked grin. "Do you need any help?"

Lily pursed her lips, then broke into an evil grin, looking up at Angel. "I could use a little... push." Turning to G'Tan, who had remained standing a short distance away after retrieving their knives, she asked, "Just one more throw, please?"

Reginald's mood hadn't improved since he'd left Gideon's quarters. He'd known something like this would happen if he ever came back to the Excalibur, but of course he hadn't had any reason to argue against his participation in this mission. At least, no reason that wouldn't cost him his career. He'd had no choice but to follow his orders. His only comfort was that the Captain hadn't been able to blackmail him again. Yet. With a Captain like Gideon, no one could ever be quite sure of anything. Especially someone the Captain didn't like, and somehow Reginald had a strong feeling that he might just fall into that category.

When he'd come to check on his team in the gym, he'd found them staring at Gideon's wife, her sister, and Matheson's lover, who were all throwing knives at a dummy. The five men had tried to give the impression that they'd only been watching for a moment, but it had been obvious that they hadn't got any work done at all. Reginald enjoyed seeing the men's scared reactions as he informed them, in detail, of what Ines would do to them if she ever found out. He was just about to send them back to work, when suddenly, something bright flashed past him, missing the tip of his nose by a hair's breadth. Jerking his head around to the right, he saw a dagger sticking into a piece of padding inside the open wall panel, barely having missed a cable.

Swallowing and trying to calm his heart's furious beating, Reginald heard a voice call, "Oh dear! I'm so sorry! That never happened to me before! The knife just slipped from my hand."

He whirled around to see the tiny redhead running toward him.

Lily ran up to the visibly rattled Jones, her eyes wide in an innocent, shocked expression. "Oh dear! I'm so sorry! [that my dagger didn't pin your nose to the wall!] "That never happened to me before! The knife just slipped from my hand." [With a little help from, and many thanks to, Angel.] She stopped a few steps from the telepath watchdog, her face wearing a concerned expression. "Are you OK?"

Jones took a deep breath and replied stiffly, "I'm fine, thank you." He eyed her, no doubt wondering whether she'd done it on purpose.

[But he can't imagine how I could aim, throwing backwards. And it seems he's a little distracted by my tattoo.] Suppressing a giggle, Lily spoke again. "I'm so glad to hear that. I don't know what I'd have done if you'd have been hurt, or..." She trailed off, leaving Jones to finish the sentence for himself, as she stepped between him and the bloodhounds, to retrieve her dagger from the wall. [Because if I'd have accidentally killed you, I couldn't torture you anymore for what you did to John.]

Turning, with her dagger in hand, she asked, "Are you sure you're all right?" giving the pale Mr. Jones

another concerned look. "You don't look that well." She could see her sisters and G'Tan discussing something in low voices, while watching them. They all gave a very creditable impression of being shocked about the 'accident'.

"I'm fine, thank you. That was just a little unexpected."

"Well, you'll be glad to hear that we've finished our practice for today, so you and your team can finally get on with your work." Lily gave him a tiny naughty smile to show him she knew the effect her and her sisters' outfits had on his team. The bloodhounds were even now staring at her, although for some reason they kept their distance, especially since she'd retrieved the dagger.

Jones' eyes flickered across her, then he cast one dark glance at the bloodhounds standing on her other side, immediately scattering them. They quickly joined the Excalibur technicians again, who had watched in silence.

[Now why would they be so eager to work, all of a sudden?] Lily gave Jones a sweet smile. "Have a nice day then, Mr. Jones, and may your good luck continue."

As soon as they were out of the gym and out of earshot, Angel, Demon and Lily doubled over with laughter. They attracted puzzled looks from a few crew members who were passing, but the sisters were in no state to hold back, or even to care. Not even Demon, who usually was so controlled.

"Did you see his face?" Angel gasped.

Demon managed to add, in between bouts of laughter, "Who'd have thought... that the big bad Mr. Jones... would be frightened... of such a tiny woman?"

From where she was kneeling on the floor, holding her aching belly, Lily replied, "Well, I have a reputation to live up to." She had another fit of the giggles before she was able to finally continue, "After all, Angel always says that dynamite comes in small packages."

When they had calmed down enough not to set each other off every time they looked at each other, Demon said, "Well, we still have some time left before lunch. Any ideas on what we could do with it?"

"How about going to the mess hall?" Angel asked. "This is something to celebrate!"

Demon agreed, while Lily seemed to give it some serious thought before sighing melodramatically. "Well, since John and Luke won't be home for a while yet, I don't have any entertainment lined up, anyway."

Her sisters smiled at the tiny redhead. Both of Lily's men were still at work, and Luke had taken the twins to the Medbay crèche that morning. He would bring them home with him during lunch break, which meant that Lily was free until then.

"Let's go see if the mess hall can cater for a little celebration. They may not have alcohol for us to celebrate with, but I happen to know that the chef has some double chocolate chip ice cream. That's an even better way to celebrate," Lily said. Demon and Angel voiced their agreement as she had expected. Breaking into a big grin, Lily added in a whisper, "We can pop the champagne from the illegal supply in our quarters, when this is over."

"Here's to regular practice," Angel announced, lifting her cup of herbal tea in a mock toast.

"Hear, hear," Lily added, clinking her cup to Demon's and Angel's. They all took a sip, then attacked the ice cream, and for a while a very uncharacteristic silence descended on their table, except for the sisters' contented sighs and 'mmms' of pleasure.

Suddenly, Lily straightened in her seat, her eyes fixed on the entrance. Angel and Demon turned to follow her look, finding the American Indian Mr. Jones entering the mess hall.

[[Well, well, what a surprise,]] Angel sent through their link, which was unhampered by Lily's block. The three women continued eating, more slowly now, while watching Jones as he took a tray and got himself something to drink.

[[Very interesting...]] Lily seemed to have forgotten to take the spoon out of her mouth, so intently was she concentrating on the telepath watchdog.

Demon considered asking her little sister if she'd decided she preferred the taste of the cutlery, and wondered if Lily would let her have the rest of her ice cream. The tall blonde decided that even with Jones nearby to distract Lily, it wouldn't be wise to ask. Besides, Angel would fight her for the ice cream, and Demon wasn't really in the mood for a fight. *[Not with my sister, at least.]*

Reminding herself of the subject of their--and by now everybody else's--attention, Demon sent, *[[What, another plan?]]* studying Lily curiously. The redhead had that 'I have an idea and don't even think of trying to stop me' look on her face.

[[Not really. A hunch, and lots of curiosity. Hang on and watch closely.]] To Demon's dismay, Lily finally seemed to decide that she preferred the taste of the ice cream to the spoon, and resumed eating it. Demon and Angel exchanged amused grins, clueless about what Lily planned, but sure that it would be entertaining. They then followed their little sister's example. *[Jones or no Jones, it would be a shame to waste this dream of an ice cream. I wonder if the cook would let me take some back to my quarters?]* Demon's thoughts drifted for a moment, remembering how Matthew liked to eat his ice cream. She managed to keep her face expressionless, but could do nothing about her nipples hardening.

Lily saw Mr. Jones walk in their general direction with his tray, and had to suppress her excitement. *[Quiet and calm, that's what I need now! This is for John!]* She took a deep breath, and when Jones was near enough, called out to him. "Good morning, Mr. Jones."

The telepath watchdog stopped and bowed his head slightly in greeting. "And a good morning to you too, Ms. Morgaine, Mrs. Gideon, Ms. Denier."

The sisters nodded and murmured a greeting, and Jones started to walk past, but Lily again stopped him. "I don't want to intrude, but we have an empty chair if you would like to join us, Mr. Jones?"

Lily could feel Demon's and Angel's slight surprise through the link, but they didn't show it, instead smiling at the older man.

Jones seemed to give the invitation a moment's thought, then smiled. "I'd be honored." He sat down on the empty chair next to Demon and opposite Lily. The sounds in the mess hall had been subdued while Lily and Jones had talked, but now a wave of murmurs arose. No one had expected Matheson's partner to invite one of the people who were working against him and the Captain to sit at her table.

When Jones sat, he looked around at the sisters. "I hope you won't ask me anything about the investigation. You must be aware that I'm not allowed to tell you anything."

Lily shook her head, sending her red curls flying. "Oh, no, we know and respect that! I was just interested in getting to know you. I've never met any telepaths other than John, and especially no Joneses." She took another spoonful of her ice cream, while Jones sipped on a glass of what looked like water. When she had swallowed, Lily continued, "And I must admit, I was intrigued, because you show your heritage so openly. From what I've heard about the Joneses so far, that seems quite unusual."

Jones had a slight smile on his lips when he nodded. "I guess it is. And I know that many telepaths don't understand me. But this is just as much part of me as my telepathic abilities. I can't deny that, no matter how hard I try. Not that I want to."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but which of the Indian nations do you belong to? If that is the current politically correct term? Such things change so quickly that it's easy to lose track. Especially for someone who's been away from Earth for a while."

"I don't mind at all. Most of my ancestors were Lakota, as far as I have been able to determine. And as for the political correctness-screw it." Jones' deep voice and the twinkle in his dark eyes clearly carried his amusement.

"No thanks, I'll stick to my husband," Demon spoke in a dead-pan voice, causing her sisters to giggle and Jones to chuckle.

There had been more giggling, chuckling, and even laughter before Jones left the witches. They'd discovered that he was a gifted storyteller, when he told them about his ancestors and gave them a brief overview of the more recent history of the American Indian nations.

"That was very interesting indeed," Angel offered, after Jones had gone back to work. "Looks like your hunch was a good one, Lily."

"I think it was. I really enjoyed myself." Lily turned to Demon. "What do you think of him?"

The tall blonde considered for a moment, and after making sure no one was listening in, leaned closer to her sisters, saying softly, "Jones seemed to enjoy talking to us. He's quite controlled, but it didn't feel as if he was hiding any underlying motives or intentions."

She frowned in concentration, trying to find words to express the emotions she'd felt from the oldest Jones. "When he was talking to us, he was totally focused on the conversation. There were times when he seemed to weigh our reactions to what he'd said or asked carefully, but I couldn't sense any deception. He seemed more relaxed than the other Joneses. Less driven." Demon gave Lily a tiny smile. "Even though I could feel his discomfort about the telepathic block."

"Well, that's to be expected. The Joneses and their teams may have got used to it, to a certain extent, but it can't be pleasant for them." Lily leaned her chin on her entwined fingers, giving her sisters a questioning look. "You know, some of the things he told us gave me the impression that he wasn't always with Psi Corps."

"You're right." Demon nodded. "Provided he wasn't lying--and I'm sure he wasn't--that could mean he was with the resistance, at least for a while, before the telepath war."

"Possible. He could have been a 'blip'--an unregistered telepath. He must be a strong one since he's working as a Jones now, so they may have pardoned him and taken him on after the Corps was disbanded. In any case, he certainly didn't seem to support certain activities of Psi Corps in the past."

"Looks like FBI is the exception to the rule among the Joneses," Angel murmured. When she noticed the perplexed expressions on her sisters' faces, she added, "Don't you remember that old movie we watched? 'Thunderheart'?"

"Oh right, you mean..." Lily's eyes widened when she remembered what Angel was referring to.

"When the guy in the wheelchair told Ray that he was FBI too," Demon continued the sentence, and her sisters chimed in as she said, "Full Blooded Indian."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four B

{Part 1: Keeping up with the Joneses}