

# The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four H - Part 1: Comfort

by The Space Witches



Some comforts are small, but none the less precious.  
by Lilith

## Chapter 1

January 26th 2271

The Kowe were certainly one of the more unusual looking races Captain Matthew Gideon had had to deal with during his career. Barely more than one meter tall, their bodies were covered with fur, including their round faces, with only their big, dark eyes, snub noses and tiny mouths peeking out. They didn't wear clothes, or shoes on their thick-soled feet. As soon as he'd seen pictures of the Kowes, Matthew had decided he'd better make sure Marcus never got too close to them--the little boy may have mistaken them for a bigger version of Half-Ted. The mental image of his son sucking on one of the delegates' ears almost made Matthew laugh, but he quickly brought himself under control, as the ramp of the Kowe shuttle descended.

The Kowe ships were just as unusual as their builders. Compared to some of the other ISA member races, they had only recently started to explore space, but they had quickly integrated other races' advanced technologies into their own. Their ships were easily recognizable, from their hang-glider like form and earthy coloring. It was the Kowe philosophy that whatever technology they used, they wanted it to harmonize with their forest-covered home. Appraising the delegates' shuttle, Matthew estimated that a human would just be able to stand upright inside it. Even though the Kowes were tiny, they reportedly preferred spacious surroundings, which was why in their ships every room consisted of at least two levels, connected by ladders.

Concentrating on the proceedings, Gideon stepped forward, welcoming High Warrior Warik and his delegation on board the Excalibur with a slight bow, before introducing himself, his Executive Officer, John Matheson, and the Minbari translator, Dunall. The Kowe delegation understood basic English, but had requested a translator for the talks.

"We are very honored that President Sheridan agreed to consider our application for Membership in the Inter-Stellar Alliance," the leader of the Kowe delegates said in his accented English, which was easily understandable despite the many rolling 'r's. He continued in a formal tone, mimicking Gideon's bow, "I am High Warrior Warik, First Advisor of Chieftess Urpta. At my side are High Shaman Cheekma, Councilor of Chieftess Urpta, and my aide, Mashik." The Kowes were organized in family clans, with a Chief or Chieftess in roughly the same role as a constitutional democracy's president. Chieftess Urpta had sent the two highest ranking members of her government, requesting that Sheridan send his two chief delegates--hence John's required presence at these talks.

Gideon nodded at the two members of the delegation as they were introduced. "We are honored by your presence and your desire to join the Inter-Stellar Alliance. If you would follow me to the conference room?"

High Warrior Warik nodded, and Gideon nodded at the honor guard to lead them to the bullet car.

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The two Kowe delegates and their aide, Dunall, John Matheson, and Matthew Gideon were seated around a table in the conference room. To accommodate the small Kowes, the usual table and chairs had been removed, and replaced by the furniture Dureena used to have in her quarters--'nice and small', she had called them. The Kowes had acknowledged the courtesy with graceful nods of approval, and obviously felt comfortable in their seats. Which was more than Gideon could say. He had soon come to envy John and especially Dunall, who didn't seem to feel the slightest bit uncomfortable on the unfamiliar low chairs. And they apparently didn't feel the need to shift their position every so often, which Gideon had suppressed until he couldn't stand it any longer, trying to move unnoticeably when he finally did.

The Captain was getting near the end of his overview of the Inter-Stellar Alliance's history and its members, when from the corner of his eye, he saw his XO's hand discreetly going to his headset. John's face took on that concentrated look Gideon associated with his listening to a message. Silently acknowledging whatever communication he'd just received, John assumed his previous position again, leaning forward with his hands folded on the conference table, overtly concentrating on the proceedings. Many years of common service enabled Gideon to discern, even without directly looking at him, that his XO was excited about something.

While Dunall finished her translation for the delegates, Gideon leaned toward his XO, asking softly,

"Is it...?" The Captain found himself excited too, as familiar questions and doubts arose, accompanied as usual by guilt. He fiercely suppressed those emotions, so John wouldn't pick up on them, although at the same time Gideon was ashamed that he had never faced them, had never faced his friend about them. [John and Luke have a right to know... but maybe we all will, in a few hours.]

John didn't seem to have noticed his Captain's inner turmoil. He nodded, his eyes sparkling in his otherwise calm face, as he answered in a barely audible voice, "I can only hope that the talks will be over, or at least adjourned, before everything is finished." He smiled briefly, but Gideon could see that the smile was tinged with longing, and John didn't sound very hopeful.

Before he could reply, the Captain heard the leader of the Kowe delegation speak. "Is there a problem?"

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John cursed himself for letting private matters interfere with their mission. Not that he wouldn't have loved to set the priorities differently, just this once. [Nothing I can do about it,] he admonished himself, as he listened to Matthew answering the High Warrior's question truthfully.

"Quite the contrary, High Warrior Warik. Commander Matheson just got the good news that his partner has gone into labor, and she will soon give birth to their third child."

Approving murmurs arose from the delegates. John felt the High Warrior's inquiring look trained on him, before he turned to Dunall, talking to her briefly, then looking at John and Matthew again.

"High Warrior Warik apologizes if he misinterprets human facial expressions, but it seems to him that Commander Matheson isn't happy about the impending birth," the Minbari translated.

For a moment John hesitated, but decided to stick to the truth. He chose his next words carefully, hoping he wouldn't inadvertently offend the delegates. "I am very happy that I'll soon be able to hold my newborn child in my arms, High Warrior Warik, but I am sad because I won't be with my partner during the birth. I am aware of the importance of these talks, and feel very honored to be part of them."

Dunall hadn't finished her translation when the High Warrior and his two companions turned to each other and discussed something quietly.

[I hope I didn't say anything...] John gave Matthew a sideways look, which he found returned. They knew that the Kowes' society was based on families and clans, but they may nonetheless regard the male's presence at a birth as something odd or even amoral, or they could have taken offence at something else John had said or left unsaid.

Warik turned to face Matheson and Gideon again. "Do all human males be present at the birth of his children?"

"Not all, but many fathers want to be present when their children are born," Matthew explained. "Both Commander Matheson and I helped our partners at the birth of our first children."

[If Alwyn was here, the Technomage would certainly enjoy telling the Kowes how he put Matthew into a Brakiri birthing chair when Marcus was born,] John thought, keeping his face blank. He watched, fascinated and just a little worried, as the High Warrior again conferred with the High Shaman and his aide.

Finally, Warik turned to look at them again, giving them what seemed like a smile, as he spoke at length. Dunall's even voice translated. "High Warrior Warik has heard the Inter-Stellar Alliance compared to a big family. Each member is different and has unique traits and abilities, but despite these differences, they help each other in times of need or danger, and learn from each other in times of peace. Kowes have always had a thirst for knowledge, and they want to learn from different races, and bring their own uniqueness into this big family. High Warrior Warik, High Shaman Cheekma, and the High Warrior's aide Mashik, are very pleased to hold these talks with people who deem family to be just as important as Kowes do."

Listening to Warik as he continued, Dunall's brow rose a millimeter in surprise--quite a show of emotion for the Minbari--and she hesitated for just a moment, before finally continuing. "Under these circumstances, the Kowe delegation will be happy to accept Commander Matheson's absence from the talks, until he has assured himself that his partner and child are well. On one condition," she added.

John blinked, trying to digest the unexpected turn events had taken, and finally managed to stammer, "Please."

The Minbari linguist translated for the High Shaman as she started speaking. "High Shaman Cheekma believes that the birth taking place now is a good omen. She wishes to conduct a protecting ritual for the child, to thank him or her for choosing this time to come into the world. She therefore asks your permission to visit your partner and child once these talks have been concluded."

John was stunned. He was aware that he had just received a great honor, and that it was an offer he couldn't refuse without offending the whole delegation, and possibly putting an end to the talks before they had really started. Opening his shields just enough to get a feel for the general 'atmosphere' in the conference room, John could feel nothing but goodwill. He threw a quick look at his Captain, who behind his poker-face was just as surprised as John, but the look in his eyes also made clear how happy he was for his friend. John bowed his head slightly to the Kowe delegates. "I would be deeply honored if High Shaman Cheekma would conduct a protecting ritual for my newborn child."

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When the door to their quarters started to open, John could hear Lily's voice saying, "Couldn't she have waited until the talks with the Kowe delegation are over? She's already a week late, so for her it wouldn't have made much difference, would it? This isn't fair to John!" He could see her pouting as she stood with her back to Luke, who was massaging the small of her back from where he was perched on the armrest of one of the easy chairs. The sofa was occupied by Angel and the twins, while Marcus and Demon sat in the other chair.

Nobody had noticed John, who stood quietly outside the open door as the tall blonde said, "I don't think your daughter was able to choose the moment of her birth," drawing an exasperated look from Lily.

Before his partner could reply, John inserted, "Quite the contrary--our daughter seems to have perfect timing. At least the Kowe delegates think so." He smiled when everyone in the room turned to stare at him in surprise.

Lily drew in her breath sharply, eyes wide. "Sweet Face!"

John met her halfway and enclosed her in a tight embrace--as tight as was possible with her round belly--as she flung her arms around his neck. He stiffened when for just a moment, before his reflexes

kicked in and his blocks came up, the pain of her contraction hit him.

"Sorry," Lily whispered, but he shook his head against her red curls.

"The only thing I'd be sorry about is if I was missing this."

Lily leaned her head back, her emerald green eyes gazing up at him. "Have the talks been suspended? Postponed? Delayed? Finished already?"

John shook his head at every one of her guesses, smiling widely. "The Kowe delegates think that the birth coinciding with the talks is a good omen. So they gave me leave until I made sure that you and our little one are all right. And..." his smile grew, "High Shaman Cheekma wants to perform a protective spell for the baby, after the talks have ended."

Lily's voice came out in a whisper as she said, "Wonderful. I'll have to thank them properly."

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"You're doing great," Luke said softly into Lily's ear. She was squatting between him and John, above several towels spread on the bed. Her arms were placed around her partners' necks for support, legs spread wide to make it easier for their child to emerge from her womb. She was tired, sweating, her face and neck flushed from the exertion, and strands of hair that had escaped from the thick braid Angel had helped her make earlier were now sticking to her face and body. But to Luke, she still was the most beautiful woman in the universe.

[And still fierce, despite everything,] Luke thought as Lily growled in reply, "I know I am," but the sideways look she gave him was clearly affectionate, and he grinned at John over Lily's head. Suddenly, she moaned loudly, closing her eyes as her head rolled back to rest on John and Luke's shoulders, her body sinking down even lower with the powerful contraction.

Máire N'Dour, who was kneeling in front of Lily in a comfortable T-shirt and slacks, feet bare like all of them, smiled up at her. The threesome had asked the nurse and midwife--whose strange name was explained by the fact that a Senegalese great-great-grandfather on her paternal side had married into an Irish family--to assist in the birth, so Luke could participate as a father rather than a doctor. "I can see her head. Just one or two more pushes, and you'll be able to hold your new daughter in your arms."

Luke smiled to himself. Several times over the past couple of hours, he'd had to bite his tongue when he'd wanted to ask or suggest something. The few times he'd slipped, three pairs of raised eyebrows had reminded him that he was to express his medical opinion or make suggestions only if asked. Fortunately, it had quickly become obvious that Máire knew what she was doing, which made it easier for him to relax and concentrate on just being there for Lily.

The tiny redhead nodded, panting, and renewed her grip on her partners' shoulders. Luke had to refrain from wincing, making a mental note that Lily would have to cut her long fingernails before any future birth.

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Gideon shifted surreptitiously in his seat, trying to ease his hip and knee joints, which ached after what seemed like hours of sitting in an unaccustomed position. His seat was too small, the table was too low, the cups in which refreshments had been served were too tiny, and the talks were taking too

long. It was all very well for the Kowes to have given John permission to leave, but the Captain would have preferred to attend this particular birth, too. Of course, he couldn't tell anyone why this child of Lily's was more special to him than the twins.

High Warrior Warik's voice droned on, interrupted intermittently by Dunall's low, melodious translation. The combination would have been sufficient to put the Captain to sleep if he hadn't been so damned uncomfortable. [How did I ever let anyone convince me that I could pretend to be a diplomat? This crap bores me to tears. When will they get to the point?]

The Kowes had specified in detail what they could offer the ISA if they became members, but seemed reluctant to say what they wanted in exchange. What they had to offer was good enough to keep Gideon in his seat, even when it felt like some instrument of torture, especially designed to torment a long legged star-ship Captain.

The Kowes' planet was a green paradise. The inhabitants lived closely in harmony with all living things there, encouraging verdant growth, and ensuring their technology complemented the environment, rather than conflicting with it. There were hints that this was a relatively recent state of affairs, and that at some time in the dim and distant past, the Kowes had allowed their technology to ravage their planet, turning it into a barren desert. The Kowes did not intend to ever let that happen again. They now nurtured all plants and animals sharing their home-world.

Some of the plants they cultivated had pharmaceutical properties that made them extremely valuable to the ISA, and it was for this reason that Gideon had been sent to negotiate membership. While the Kowes would not tolerate mass harvesting, they would allow measured, reasonable collection of crops. All Gideon really wanted to know was what they wanted in exchange.

His patience finally cracked, along with his joints, and he interrupted his Minbari translator a little more abruptly than he'd intended. "It's really good to hear what a great job you're doing of conserving the natural wealth of your world, High Warrior, but let's cut to the chase, shall we? What do you want from the ISA?"

The cramp in the Captain's legs reached the point where he could no longer tolerate it, and he decided he'd had enough of political correctness for one day. The Kowes would just have to stretch their necks a little. If they had necks under all that fur.

Gideon pushed himself to his feet, hearing joints crack as he moved. High Shaman Cheekma looked a little startled at the popping sounds emerging from the Captain's legs, and she looked up at him in surprise. A silence fell around the low table, during which Gideon stretched his arms above his head and attempted to straighten his bent spine. More popping noises sounded like small gun fire.

Rotating his shoulders and rubbing at the sore spots there, Gideon frowned down at the Kowe delegation, asking again, "Tell us what you want. If it's reasonable, I'm sure we can reach an agreement."

Warik and Cheekma went into a furry huddle, while Mashik continued to watch the Captain with his tiny mouth open, black eyes wide and round within his dark brown hairy face. Gideon decided the Kowes had probably never heard sounds like that coming from inside someone's body before. [Stick around, Teddy Tubby. You'd be amazed at what other noises I can make.]

Gideon was aware that Dunall was gazing at him disapprovingly. The Minbari had sat on the low stool with her arms crossed under her robe, unmoving for the duration of the talks. The Captain

decided that Minbari must have different joints to humans. More flexible ones.

He waited in silence, looking down at the two conferring Kowes, watching them as they whispered to each other. It was easy to tell the two apart. Warik had golden brown fur, marked around the eyes with dark patches, which made him look as if he was wearing a mask. Cheekma's fur was striped, dark and light brown.

Finally, the Kowes broke up their conference, and Warik turned his dark eyes to look up at Gideon, towering above him. For just a moment, the Captain could have sworn he saw a twinkle of amusement in those eyes, as the High Warrior said, "We want polar bears. As many of them as you can give us."

"Wanna see sister!"

Swearing to herself that her little red-haired sister would have to look for a different babysitter the next time she gave birth, Demon lifted her eyes from the book she'd been reading, to look down at the three children sitting on the floor. Faylinn, who had once again been the one to voice her impatience, was looking back at her with a pout.

The tall blonde suppressed a sigh, and prepared to repeat what she'd said umpteen times in the past seven or so hours.

This time, Dasha beat her to it. "Gotta wait." He was looking at his twin sister with such a serious expression that Demon couldn't help but be amused.

"Wanna watch!"

Again, Dasha replied in his quiet, matter-of-fact manner. "Ma said hurts." He frowned in concentration as he repeated his mother's words, in simpler terms. "Marco hurt too. You wanndat?"

Ignoring Marcus' muttered comment that he wasn't a cry-baby, and he wanted to watch too, Faylinn said softly, "No." She was still pouting, but after a moment, all three children turned their attention back to the plush toys they had been playing with.

Demon felt the sofa vibrating and looked at Angel, who had sat quietly at the other end of the seat during the exchange. Now her raven-haired sister was grinning at her, trying hard not to laugh out loud. [[Wait until you have a couple of brats of your own, then you'll be relieved if any argument ends so quickly, and without tears!]] she sent, smiling wickedly as Angel stuck out her tongue.

The sound of the connecting door to Lily, John and Luke's quarters opening prevented Angel from retorting. The children jumped up and the sisters put their books aside, all of them expecting John, Luke or nurse N'Dour to come and tell them that the twins' new sister had arrived.

"Well, I certainly wasn't expecting such an enthusiastic welcome committee," the newcomer's booming voice announced, as the door closed behind him.

Demon sat up abruptly, staring open-mouthed at the man who stood in front of them, sweeping his eyes over the assembly with an amused grin. "Alwyn? Alwyn!" She jumped up from the sofa, hurling herself across the room and into the arms of the elderly Technomage.

"I'm glad you still recognize your honorary father," Alwyn said, smiling at her as she leaned back in his embrace, "Even though for a while you did have me wondering if giving you away had been such a

good idea."

Demon laughed when he let go of her and looked at Angel, still standing in front of the sofa.

"Ah, if Paris had to choose between the Witches of Eriadne, he would have to cut the golden apple in four!" Alwyn closed the distance and took Angel's right hand in his, bowing slightly as he lifted it to his lips.

Demon could see the corners of her sister's mouth twitch. "Why, your charms seem to increase with age, Alwyn," Angel replied in the same tone, bowing her head slightly, then grinned.

Alwyn chuckled. "Good to see you haven't lost your sense of humor." The Technomage let go of her hand, and with a grace that would have put many younger men to shame, turned and squatted down in one smooth movement. He smiled at the children, who had watched the proceedings with curiosity. "Hello Marcus, Dasha, Faylinn." He nodded at each child as they returned his greeting, then sighed melodramatically. "Seeing how much you three have grown since you were born reminds me of how much older I've become."

"How old?" Marcus asked.

"Marcus, it's not polite to ask..." Demon chastised her son softly, but Alwyn waved his hand in dismissal.

"That's all right. I'm much older than you think, Marcus. But the number of years doesn't matter. The important thing is that you fill them with meaning." He smiled mysteriously.

"Where sister?" Faylinn suddenly blurted out, as if she'd wanted to ask that question since the Technomage arrived, and couldn't hold it back any longer.

Alwyn's smile faltered for a moment as he looked at the twins, but his voice was calm when he replied. "She's arrived, but you can't see her yet, nor your mother. There is a tiny... problem."

Demon saw her own worries mirrored on Angel's face.

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"Polar bears? Why do you want polar bears?" It didn't take long for Gideon to regret having asked the question, as High Shaman Cheekma answered him. Explicitly. In excruciating detail.

It appeared that the Kowes had a population problem. They were a dying race. Gideon felt a blush start somewhere around his ankles, as Cheekma described every aspect of how the male Kowes could no longer perform their reproductive duties. The Captain could really have done without the long, involved description of the Kowe mating rituals, and the exact details of their preferred methods of copulation. Gideon realized that he would never be able to look at Half-Ted in the same way again. The little teddy bear would always bring to mind images of fornicating furry life forms.

The thing that impressed and amazed Gideon most was the extent of the High Shaman's vocabulary. Her use of Standard English to describe the activities in which the Kowes had once happily indulged, but of which they were now sorely deprived, was extraordinary. A quick glance at Dunall showed that the Minbari translator was equally impressed. Either that, or her mouth hanging open indicated that she was as embarrassed as Gideon. For a moment, the Captain mused that he'd never seen a Minbari

blush before. There was a first time for everything.

When Cheekma finally, blessedly, finished her description of the Kowe males' inability to perform to the satisfaction of their females, Gideon cleared his throat. "Um, yes. Very interesting. But where do polar bears fit...I mean what do you want to do with...I mean...Oh hell. What do you want the polar bears for?"

The Captain closed his eyes and prayed that the answer to his question wouldn't be what he feared. A part of his mind was already screaming, [Too much information!] He could only hope the Kowes weren't about to make it worse.

High Warrior Warik took up the tale. "The Earth polar bear is, I believe, the most dangerous predator on your planet?" Gideon nodded and the golden brown Kowe continued. "The example of such aggression would be a great stimulus for the male Kowe. To see such animals interacting and mating would be extremely exciting to us. In many ways, they are anatomically similar to us. We would like as many data crystals as you can supply with images of polar bears, please, with detailed behavioral and anatomical analyses. If you can provide pictures and moving images which involve the bears copulating, that would be even better. And we would like some living specimens to take back to our planet. That is our price for our plants."

Gideon closed his eyes, swallowed, wetted his dry lips with his tongue, and managed to choke out a single word.

"Done."

So why did he feel that he was the one who'd just been 'done'?

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Lily cradled her newborn daughter against her chest, smiling down at her. A couple of wet locks of hair were plastered to the baby's tiny head, clearly red, and Lily found herself wondering if the girl's baby-blue eyes would turn green or brown. But that didn't matter; she was beautiful, even though her skin was wrinkled, and still had a slight bluish sheen. She was covered with the white creamy substance that protected her from the change in temperature from her mother's womb to the room, and would nourish her body as it was absorbed over the coming hours.

Yet amidst the happiness and euphoria she felt, Lily's heart suddenly skipped a beat, and her eyes went wide. Something was wrong. When the baby girl breathed, a wheezing sound was clearly audible. Lily suppressed the panic that threatened to rise inside her, instead concentrating on sending her love to the baby through their link, while searching Luke's face with her eyes. He was already sweeping a medical scanner over the newborn, frowning.

"Luke, what is it? Why can't she breathe properly?" Lily was unable to keep a slight tremble from her voice. She knew that if she uttered one more word, her self-control would slip, as she could feel through their link that her daughter wasn't getting enough air--some, but not enough.

Luke ignored her question, instead giving Máire rapid instructions, which Lily was unable to grasp, and not just because of the quick succession of words. [Shock. I have to snap out of it! I have to think straight now,] she thought, as the nurse nodded and hurried out of the bedroom. Snuggling into John's arms, which were encircling her and their newborn child, Lily watched anxiously as Luke turned to look at them, taking a deep breath.

"What's wrong with our daughter?" John asked, his voice deceptively quiet, but Lily could feel through the touch of his mind on hers that he was worried too.

Luke's eyes rested on the baby girl, as he covered Lily's and John's hands with his own, squeezing them as he smiled gently at his partners. "No reason to panic. Our daughter has a condition called subglottic stenosis, a narrowing of her windpipe below the larynx--about here." He pointed to his own throat, just below his Adam's apple. "That's why she can't breathe properly. She'll be fine," he continued in a calm voice before John or Lily could say anything, adding after a moment's hesitation, "if we operate as soon as possible."

Lily stared at the doctor for a moment, then down at their newborn daughter, trying to digest what he'd said, trying to sort through the chaos of emotions and thoughts inside her. [How is this possible? I should have known... Why didn't I realize? What did he say... Operate?] Something inside her instinctively rebelled against the idea, but she chastised herself. [No matter how over-protective he can be sometimes, you know that Luke would never suggest surgery if it wasn't necessary!]

"How soon?" John's soft voice cut through the haze. His arms were gently hugging Lily against his chest.

"At the moment, the umbilical cord is still providing her with enough oxygen to prevent any damage," Luke explained. "It will continue to do so for a while, so it would be best to get her and Lily to Medbay now. We'll only cut the umbilical cord just before we operate. I'm afraid since Dr. Merzo, our specialist in this kind of surgery, is on leave, I'll have to..."

"*You'll* have to stay with your family, while I perform the surgery," a female voice suddenly announced from the living room. "That is, if you'll accept help from someone not on your staff, Dr. Raven." All eyes turned to the tall, dark woman who now stood in the doorway.

"Sarah!" Luke exclaimed, in unison with John and Lily. His relief was obvious as he smiled at the former CMO of the Excalibur. "You're a godsend, as usual!"

"Not exactly," Sarah Chambers muttered under her breath, as she squatted down next to the bed, giving the tiny redhead and her Asian partner an encouraging smile. "Don't worry. I'm sure Luke will explain the details to you later, but I can assure you that it's a minor operation, and there won't be any aftereffects. Your daughter will be fine, just as Luke said. I promise." Sarah's voice was calm and firm, her eyes warm and full of reassurance.

Lily looked from Sarah to Luke, who nodded and smiled softly, then down at their newborn daughter, whose breathing was still obviously labored. She felt John's lips place a gentle kiss on her shoulder, accompanied by a wave of love. Steeling herself, Lily took a deep breath and hugged the tiny girl against her chest. [[You'll be fine, my darling. Dad and Auntie Sarah will take good care of you.]] She gently kissed the top of her daughter's head, then lifted her eyes again to look at the two doctors. Her voice was raw as she whispered, "Do what you have to. If an operation is necessary to heal our daughter... so be it."

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John watched as Lily digested the information Luke had just given them about what was happening in the surgical suite in front of which they were sitting. After making a vertical incision in the narrowed section of their daughter's windpipe, Sarah Chambers would insert a graft into it, to enlarge its

diameter as necessary. Within a couple of weeks, the graft would be firmly attached and adapted to the surrounding material, and fully integrated into their daughter's windpipe.

Lily had silently listened to Luke, a nod after he fell silent the only acknowledgement that she had heard anything he'd said. While Luke gave instructions to nurse Jensen, who sometimes looked after the children in the crèche, Lily seemed perfectly calm, sitting in a chair with her head held high, as she watched Sarah and the assisting nurse through the window.

John's look followed Lily's, hoping that everything would go as well as Sarah and Luke believed, and that their daughter wouldn't remember any of this subconsciously. [If she does, we'll make sure she gets over it quickly,] he swore to himself. But soon his eyes were drawn back to the face of his tiny red-haired partner. The physical exhaustion and emotional stress of the last hours showed clearly--she was even paler than usual, and John was just able to see shadows on the skin around the outside corners of her eyes. Her hair was still in the same braid as during the birth, loose strands curling around her face and neck. She had slouched just a little into the chair, but would not move from where she sat. A quick glance and smile up at Luke, when he'd joined them again and slid his arm around her shoulders, had been all the distraction she'd allowed herself, before again locking her eyes on what was happening in the surgical suite.

Lily hadn't listened to Luke's and John's protests that she should rest after the placenta had been placed in an earthen bowl. "I'm not suffering," had been her only reply as she'd struggled up. With a resigned smile, Luke had asked her to lie back at least long enough so he could treat her abused vagina with a regenerator. After a shower that had been over too quickly to be much more than a lick and a promise, Lily had slipped into the simple shift they'd brought for her.

When Luke wanted her to sit in a wheelchair to wait while Sarah was operating on their daughter, Lily had become stubborn again, hissing that she wasn't sick and could still stand on her own two feet. But Luke could be stubborn too, when necessary. Pointedly but quietly, he'd reminded their red-haired lover that it would not help their daughter if she exhausted herself or had a hemorrhage. Lily had grudgingly agreed to sit in a *normal* chair, if they let her walk there herself. Supported by Luke and John, Lily had walked slowly into Medbay's main room, where they'd all settled down to wait.

Being so close to her, John could clearly feel preoccupation below Lily's exhaustion--almost anxiety. Something was bothering her, and his instincts told him it wasn't the surgery.

He caught Luke's questioning look over Lily's head, and sent a short thought to him. [[Later.]] He had a feeling that it was best to let their Fire-Lily reveal what was bothering her in her own time--and that the time would soon come.

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Lily sat between her men, watching Sarah Chambers as she stood with her back to them. Sarah's head was bowed, her arms moving unhurriedly, while the nurse took and gave her instruments and other items, checked the monitor with their patient's vital stats every now and then, or did whatever else Sarah asked of her.

That the former CMO of the Excalibur had appeared just when she was needed, told Lily that this was more than a coincidence. Luke's relief had been obvious--not that he'd have been any less qualified to do the surgery, but it would have gone against his principle of not treating family, especially when it came to operating. This synchronicity was why Lily was sure their baby daughter would be all right.

[As right as rain. Soon I'll welcome you by your name, my darling.]

So why was she feeling so anxious?

Lily suppressed a sigh. [You know why.] The thought that was plaguing her had first arisen just after Luke had explained what was wrong with their daughter, but then things had gone so quickly that she hadn't had time to dwell on it. Until now. And it wouldn't go away.

[Dear Mother, why are you so pathetic? You've never been one to shy away from the truth, so why now? Open your mouth and ask! It won't go away if you try to ignore it,] her inner voice chided.

[I want to, but I can't. It's as if I'm paralyzed! I'm afraid...]

[Of what? Of having to admit you may have been wrong?]

Lily wanted to retort, but stopped herself short. Was that it? No, not really. Not that alone. [I've been wrong many times before, but never... No, I won't go there!]

Sounding as if it wanted to give her an encouraging mental push, the voice said softly, [Go on, ask him! It will only get worse if you don't.]

Admitting to herself that her inner voice was right, Lily finally gathered all her courage. "Luke?"

"Hmm?"

The tiny, gentle smile Luke directed at her when she looked at him almost made her breath catch in her throat, but she rushed on, the words tumbling out of her. "If I'd let you take the usual tests and scans, would you have been able to--to discover it?"

Luke's smile faded, just a little, as he gazed at her for a long, silent second, then nodded.

For a moment, Lily sat as if frozen, while the implications of what that nod meant stormed in on her--all the implications she had refused to face so far. And the worst one kept echoing in her head again and again. [If it had been something more severe, you could have killed her!]

[No! I didn't want to--I just wanted... I just...] Lily lowered her head and closed her eyes tightly, covering her ears with her hands, as if by doing so she could shut out the thoughts, doubts and self-accusations. She heard John and Luke's dampened voices call her name and she tried to stand and get away from them, but arms were wrapped around her from behind, and hands took hold of her wrists, dragging her hands away from her ears, gently but forcefully.

"Lily, please, listen to me," She felt the pressure of Luke's fingers under her chin as he tried to get her to look at him. "Look at me, Lily." His voice was pleading, and she had never been able to refuse him when he used that tone.

Sniffing--[When did I start crying?]-she slowly lifted her head, looking up into Luke's brown eyes hesitatingly, afraid of what she'd see. But no anger or disappointment showed, just love and concern, as he took her hands between his, crouching before her.

"Yes, I would have been able to detect that our daughter's windpipe wasn't developing properly, but even then, we couldn't have done anything before she was born."

"But what if... if it had been something life-threatening?" Lily asked between sniffles. Goddess, I was so sure I'd know if... if something was wrong! Everything felt perfect through the link."

"Maybe you didn't recognize any problem because there *wasn't* any problem, at that time?" John suggested from behind her, his arms still wrapped lightly around her shoulders in a comforting embrace.

The tiny redhead turned halfway, leaning her head back into her neck so she could study John's face. "What do you mean?"

John lifted his right hand to wipe the last tears from her face as he explained, "As long as she was inside your womb, the oxygen she needed entered her body through the umbilical cord. She didn't need the windpipe to breathe, so the subglottic stenosis didn't pose a problem."

Lily's eyes widened in surprise. The whole time she had asked herself how she could have missed something that important, but it had never occurred to her that she was only receiving information on her daughter's well-being at that specific moment. [Maybe in a merge I might have been able to detect something like this, but the link is much less complete.] "You're right. You're absolutely right, of course! Oh Mother, what a fool I was for not realizing that!"

Before she could continue, Luke put the tip of his index finger on her lips. "Shush now. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. Our daughter will be all right, that's all that matters now."

Lily made an effort to smile, but even so, she knew it was shaky, just like her voice. "And I've learned my lesson. I promise that from now on I'll be less antagonistic when it comes to using 'modern' medicine."

Her men pulled her into a warm hug, kissing the top of her head as she snuggled into their chests. Suddenly, Luke chuckled, and Lily found a teasing smile on his lips when she looked up at him warily.

"But don't you dare steal my role of over-protective parent."

Before Lily's smile could grow into a giggle, the door to the surgical suite opened.

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Sarah Chambers saw three faces turn toward her expectantly, as she left the surgical suite with the newborn in her arms. The little girl was wearing a sleeper that was still too large for her. A square band aid stuck to her throat, held in place by a bandage around her neck, was the only evidence of surgery. Before Lily could push herself up out of her chair, Sarah moved to kneel in front of her, holding out the tiny bundle out to her mother. "Here you go. Everything went perfectly. Your daughter will be all right in no time."

She saw Lily swallow as she looked at her, as if needing confirmation that she really could hold her daughter. Sarah gave her an encouraging nod, and tears of joy and relief showed in the tiny redhead's eyes before she lowered them to the baby girl. Lily lifted her into her own arms gently, as if she was handling something immensely precious and delicate. [Which she is,] Sarah thought, smiling as she accepted the threesome's warm thanks with a shake of her head, saying she was glad she could help.

Watching Lily, John and Luke bow over the still sleeping baby, Sarah had to admit she'd enjoyed

holding the little girl in her arms very much. She had always loved children, and it had reminded her of having held her niece soon after her birth. Sarah suppressed the feeling of guilt that still accompanied memories of her sister and niece. She may have learned to live with the fact that she had been unable to save them, but sometimes Sarah still woke up in the middle of the night, asking herself if they would still be alive if she had pushed herself more, if she had tried harder to find a cure for the Drakh plague.

Lately though, her wish for children had surfaced again. Maybe because she didn't bury herself in her work as much as she used to. Sarah shook herself out of her reverie. "I'm afraid I never caught your daughter's name."

Lily smiled at her. "I'm sure you didn't, as I have been unable to greet her with it yet, and I won't say it before then. So you'll have to wait until after she wakes up."

"Wonderful, I won't have to wait long then. The anesthetic should wear off in about a half hour. And I'm sure your daughter will soon be demanding her first meal. You can breastfeed her as usual. The graft has a pain-numbing effect, so she shouldn't feel any discomfort when swallowing or breathing."

Lily heaved a relieved sigh. "Thank you. I must admit I won't be disappointed if I can empty my breasts."

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Matthew Gideon walked down the empty corridor leading to Medbay, hesitating when he reached the door. He had received a call from Deborah immediately after he'd seen the Kowe delegation back to their ship--no doubt his wife had asked Lt. Siddhartha to notify her when their guests had left--and she had briefly explained to him that Lily's daughter had needed surgery due to a birth defect in her throat.

Deborah had also said something about Alwyn showing up and Sarah performing the surgery, but before he'd been able to fully grasp that, his wife had hurried to assure him that the baby girl and her mother were doing fine. She'd gone on to add that she and Angel would take the children to Medbay, as the baby was now awake, so the twins could finally see their baby sister, and hear her name. Gideon couldn't help but smile when he'd heard the children's excited voices in the background, and he had promised to join them as soon as he'd finished his preliminary report about the talks for Sheridan's office.

It hadn't been easy to concentrate on the report, but he'd forced the thoughts about Lily's--[And my?]-daughter to the back of his mind, and didn't allow himself to leave his office before he was finished.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, he took a deep breath and stepped into Medbay. Nurse N'Dour greeted him, and he thanked her with a smile when she pointed him to the room that was occupied by the newest inhabitant of the Excalibur.

The image that greeted him there was one of peace and quiet, erasing his last concerns about the welfare of the newborn. Lily was sitting in a chair, holding a tiny bundle in her arms, with Faylinn, Dasha and Marcus gathered around her, watching the baby in awe. John and Luke sat either side of their partner, with Deborah and Angel completing the small circle.

"Little," Faylinn whispered, gently touching her sisters' tiny fingers.

"You two were even smaller when you were born, because you had to share the space in here," Lily

replied with a smile. The twins turned to look at their mother with big eyes as she patted her belly gently.

"Me little?" Marcus asked softly, obviously just as fascinated by his new cousin.

Demon leaned forward, ruffling his blond locks. "No, you were bigger than all of them."

Suddenly Lily looked up, smiling as she saw Gideon stand in the door. "Matthew! Come greet Naima." The tiny redhead's eyes were sparkling as she held out her right hand, and Matthew thought that even though her exhaustion was obvious, she looked breathtakingly beautiful.

He slipped into the circle between Angel and Luke, squeezing Lily's hand as he squatted next to her chair. "So this is the little troublemaker?" he said jokingly, carefully controlling his emotions as he looked down at the tiny girl. He was all too aware of Deborah sitting nearby, watching him and smiling, and he wondered how much of his feelings she was picking up. She tried to block, but Gideon knew that strong emotions could often get through those blocks. He just needed to be sure that he didn't allow his excitement and apprehension to be any stronger than would appear natural for John's best friend.

[Amazing how quickly you forget just how small newborns can be,] he thought, as he bent over to look at the little girl. Naima was awake, and blue eyes looked at him--[Of course, they all have blue eyes at birth. But what color will they turn to?] The color of the girl's hair at least left no doubt about whom her mother was, as the short locks covering her head were bright red. She looked like a porcelain doll with her delicate features and limbs, even though her skin was still slightly wrinkled and a bandage peeked out from the neck of her sleeper. There was nothing to indicate that Naima was his daughter, and Matthew wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed.

He forced the thought away and smiled at Lily. "Naima--a beautiful name for a beautiful little girl."

"Just like her mother," John smiled affectionately at his partner.

"And both mother and daughter need rest now--and you, too," Luke said, looking at the twins. Before they could protest, he added, "You can sleep on the bed right next to Naima's cot, if you want, while Ma sleeps on the other bed. That way you can all watch out for her. All right?"

That offer was greeted with more enthusiasm by Faylinn and Dasha, and Matthew held out his arms to his son. "Come on. Mummy looks like she could use a nap, too. Want to keep her company while I go back to work?" Marcus nodded eagerly at the thought of doing something for his mother, and let his father lift him up.

Deborah chuckled as she stood and walked up to them. "And I'll count on you to take over from Marcus later," she whispered in a throaty voice that sent a shiver down Matthew's spine, before turning to smile down at her younger sister. "Get all the rest you can. You'll need it."

Lily's rippling laughter was soft as she leaned into Deborah's and then Angel's hugs, and thanked them for their help.

"Demon and Angel, professional babysitters, at your service." The raven-haired witch winked at her little sister as she waited for Deborah to join her.

Matthew passed Marcus to his wife, promising them he'd be home soon, then turned to smile at Lily

as Deborah and Angel left. "I'm afraid I'll have to borrow John from you for a while."

Lily pouted, then broke into a grin. "Well, all right then. Have the talks gone well?"

"Oh yes, only a few details left to hammer out..." He trailed off as he realized what he'd just said. [Not the best expression to use in relation to this deal, Matt!] He quickly continued, "The briefing shouldn't take too long," then he looked at John. "Join me in the conference room whenever you're ready."

"Thank you, Sir. I'll be there soon."

Suddenly, Matthew noticed that two certain someones were missing. "Where are Sarah and Alwyn?"

"They went back to Alwyn's ship shortly before you arrived. He said something about having to check up on Ishtar."

Matthew nodded. "I don't even want to know the details. With my luck, she's pregnant and about to give birth on my ship." After a hug for Lily and a quick caressing touch for Naima, Matthew left Medbay, still wondering if this little girl was his daughter.

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### January 27th 2271

The familiar sound of Lily's harp welcomed Matthew when he entered Medbay late next morning. The melody sounded Celtic, which he knew was one of her favorite music styles, and it was light and uplifting. Apparently the music had the same effect on the Medbay staff. Gideon noted when greeting nurses, lab technicians and doctors that many of them were humming along to the melody, nodding their head or tapping their feet to its rhythm.

When Gideon reached the open door of the room Lily shared with Naima, he leaned his shoulder against the doorframe, crossing his arms. He watched the tiny redhead sitting on the edge of a chair, leaning forward, the small harp standing between her feet. Her eyes were half-lidded, her face set in an expression that somehow combined concentration with absentmindedness. Delicate fingers found the strings effortlessly, as they moved with swiftness and grace.

Gideon smiled when he remembered the concert Lily and a few other musically inclined individuals had given for the crew of the Excalibur a couple of months before, and how relaxed the atmosphere on the whole ship had been for days afterwards. [Maybe we should make it a regular event, to keep up crew morale.] Not that it was really necessary. Despite the cultural differences of the various ISA member species living together on the Excalibur, they all were proud to serve on the ISA's flag ship, and determined to do justice to its reputation.

Matthew realized that his gaze had wandered to the tiny bundle inside the crib, but before he had time to dwell on the conflicting emotions that sight evoked, the melody came to an end.

"Good morning, Captain." Lily smiled when she saw him, carefully setting the harp aside and turning her chair to face the Captain, before continuing softly, "If you've come to recruit our new arrival for EF training, I'm afraid you're a little too early." Her emerald green eyes were sparkling with mirth. She looked relaxed and happy.

"I hope I'll have first bid on her, though, once she's old enough." Matthew grinned as he entered, and

sat down following Lily's inviting gesture toward the chair next to hers. "How is Naima doing?" He kept his voice low so he wouldn't disturb the baby girl.

"Sarah checked up on her earlier and she confirmed what I was able to pick up through our link--Naima is doing just fine. So we should be able to take her home by tomorrow evening." Lily was almost bouncing in her chair with excitement at the prospect, and Matthew smiled, feeling more relief at the news than he ought.

"That's wonderful, Lily." For a moment he pondered--[No, business first.]

"Has John told you about the protection ritual that the Kowes' High Shaman wants to perform for Naima?"

Lily nodded.

"I just talked to High Warrior Warik. Chieftess Urpta offered to host a party down on the planet, to celebrate the successful conclusion of the talks, and the High Shaman wants to perform her protection ritual on that occasion. I didn't want to risk exposing Naima to a strange environment so soon after the operation, so Warik and I agreed that the Kowes can bring the food, drink, and entertainment, and we'll provide the venue. I hope that suits you?"

"Oh that's perfect. Thank you, Matthew. When will the party take place?"

"That's the other thing I wanted to ask. Tonight? The Kowes will be leaving immediately after the party."

Lily pursed her lips and regarded Matthew for a moment, then stood to look down at her newborn daughter sleeping in her cot. She reached down to stroke her soft red hair, then nodded after a few seconds, a smile spreading on her lips.

"Yes, that would be perfect. Sarah mentioned she and Alwyn may have to leave soon, so we could hold our own little blessing ceremony tomorrow afternoon, while they're still here, but after the Kowes leave--I'd prefer to keep that event in the family." She gave him a questioning look, waiting for his nod before continuing, "I can bring Naima to the Kowes' party this evening, for Cheekma's protection ritual. Sarah and Luke have assured me that after taking her home, I can treat my baby girl just like I did the twins at that age, apart from the care of her wound." Her voice clearly carried her relief and happiness.

Gideon nodded and stood. "Good. I'll inform the Kowes." His eyes followed Lily's loving gaze to Naima, and he couldn't help but step closer and look down at her. The girl was sleeping peacefully, curled up on her belly, breathing calmly.

[Well, what are you waiting for? Business is over!] Keeping his eyes on the sleeping baby girl, Matthew took a deep breath. "Lily?"

"Yes?"

When he hesitated, Lily gave him a questioning look, and he hurried on, "What does 'Naima' mean?" The moment the words had left his mouth, he wanted to kick himself. [Idiot! Stop beating around the bush!] Carefully keeping his emotions from showing on his face, he watched Lily smile. But her reply almost made him choke.

"It's Arabic for 'comfort'." The tiny redhead either didn't notice his surprise, or chose to ignore it, and continued calmly, "As Shakespeare put it so wonderfully, 'I have been troubled in my sleep this night, but dawning day new comfort hath inspir'd.' It's true for the past and the present, though then it was afternoon and evening instead of night and dawning day."

Matthew licked his suddenly dry lips, head spinning. Had Lily really said what he thought she had? He wasn't sure if he'd interpreted her words correctly, or the look and smile she gave him, but he had to ask the question that had been gnawing at him for the last nine months.

"Is this a surprise inspection, Captain?"

Gideon was barely able to keep himself from jumping at the sound of Luke Raven's amused voice behind him. [Damn! That's what I get for hesitating too long!]

Lily flowed into her partner's open arms, purring when he planted a kiss on the top of her head, which gave Matthew enough time to recover. He promised himself that he'd ask her the very next time they were alone, as he gave Luke a lazy grin.

"If this was a surprise inspection, you'd be running scared, dashing around Medbay like a dervish by now."

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Holding a drink in one hand, with his free arm wrapped tightly around his wife's waist, Matthew Gideon beamed happily around the party. All was well with the world, especially when Deborah wore the dress he loved best. Gideon loved to see her in it, and he loved to take her out of it, too. But that was for later. For now, the party was a double celebration, with Naima the star of the show, albeit a completely unconscious one. The little girl had woken briefly when she was moved from Medbay to the mess hall for the Kowes' protection ritual, but other than that she had slept like an angel. That fact alone was enough to make Gideon doubt her paternity. It was unlikely that any child of his would be so well behaved.

The protection ritual had been interesting, and now the Kowes circulated amongst the senior crew of the Excalibur and their partners. Gideon had invited Alwyn and Sarah to join the party, but they had declined politely, saying they were busy. He'd wondered what might be occupying them, then decided he'd rather not know. Looking around the mess hall, the Captain could see Cheekma chatting amiably to Luke, while Mashik had Lt. Jackson penned into a corner and seemed to be describing something to her, his furry little arms gesticulating wildly. Jackson looked for all the world as if she'd been cornered by an ambulatory teddy bear.

High Warrior Warik made his way across the room, nodding politely at each person he passed, until he came to a halt in front of where Gideon stood with Deborah. The Kowe looked up at the couple, seeming to peer through the dark mask created by the markings around his eyes.

"This is most satisfactory, Captain. The arrival of your First Officer's daughter, coinciding with the happy conclusion of our talks, couldn't be a better omen for our prosperous future membership of the ISA."

The fluency of Warik's speech startled Gideon. Either the Kowe negotiator had improved his knowledge of English astonishingly within a very short period, or he had never really needed a translator at all.

And if that was true, why had they made the request?

Gideon forced his suspicions aside and smiled down at the Kowe. "We're delighted to have you on board, High Warrior. And that's both on board the Excalibur and the ISA. I've received a message from President Sheridan's office advising that several Earth zoos have agreed to donate live polar bears to the transport being put together to be sent to your world."

The Captain pushed aside the memory of his discussion with the bureaucrats who ran the ISA. They had been somewhat reluctant to believe the terms of the deal he had struck with the Kowes. He went on, "Within the next couple of days the ship should be on its way, and it should arrive here at Kowe within the week. The bears are being transported in stasis, so they don't get distressed in the confined space of the ship. We've sent several breeding pairs, so you can see them..." Gideon paused, trying to find a suitable euphemism, then decided that as only Deborah could hear him, it didn't really matter. "So you can see them mating, as you requested."

Warik's eyes glittered with what Gideon hoped was good humor. He could only pray that it wasn't excitement, and that the furry negotiator wasn't about to grab his leg and start humping it. Then the Captain reminded himself that he was in no danger. It was the low libido of the Kowe males that had led to their desperate quest for stimulation.

Warik bowed from the waist, straightened and said, "You have no idea how grateful my people will be, Captain Gideon. No idea at all. We are sorely in need of the erotic inspiration these animals will provide."

Before Gideon could stop him, Warik launched into an enthusiastic description of exactly how the polar bears would reinvigorate the sex lives of the Kowes. Again, his vocabulary left the Captain breathless, and Gideon suffered a sensation of burning around the ears that for a moment made him wonder if Ishtar had flown into the room when he wasn't looking, and whether she was gently flaming him.

After a few moments of excruciating embarrassment, Gideon managed to drag Deborah away from Warrior Warik, making his excuses that he needed to circulate amongst his other guests. As they crossed the room, Deborah gave a low chuckle and said quietly, "You should have let him finish, Matthew. That was most educational."

Gideon stopped abruptly and looked at his wife in surprise. "Educational? I didn't think there was anything anyone could teach us about fornication." He grinned and pulled her closer, kissing her neck gently before releasing her.

Deborah chuckled again. "I doubt if they could, but that Kowe could teach a master-class in prevarication. I've never heard anyone do it better."

Gideon blinked as he took in what his wife had just said, then his jaw dropped suddenly and he had to close his mouth quickly. "Prevarication? Warik was lying?" Deborah nodded. "So they don't really want the polar bears at all?" The Captain started to seriously doubt his sanity. He was sure that was what the Kowes had wanted, but he'd learned long before not to doubt his wife in this respect. If she said someone was lying, then lying they were.

"Oh no! They want the polar bears all right, but the reasons Warik gave you were pure fabrication. Rather cleverly delivered, actually. I'd hazard a guess that they've studied humans, and have learned that we're generally not comfortable talking openly about certain biological functions. They deliberately picked a reason for their request that they knew you would be too embarrassed to question. Devious

little buggers, aren't they?" Deborah looked fondly at the three Kowes who had now gathered in a group, talking to Lily where she sat holding Naima, with John and Luke sitting either side of her.

Gideon gritted his teeth as he looked over at the peaceful scene. "You're sure Warik was lying?" He had to ask, although he was certain of the answer.

Deborah raised an eyebrow, seeming surprised that he should doubt her. "Oh yes. Lying through his pointy little teeth, I'm afraid."

Gideon almost snarled as he marched across the room, muttering, "They're going to tell me the truth this time, or I'll have their furry hides as throws for the couch!"

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The Captain leaned back against the ledge in the conference room, surveying his audience. The three Kowes looked up at him from their seats with great anticipation, and Gideon was pleased to see that their hairy feet were dangling well above the floor. [They can be the ones who suffer this time,] he thought.

By the time he'd reached the Kowe delegation where they'd stood talking to Lily, Gideon had regained control of his temper. He'd surprised Lily, Luke and John by advising the Kowes that Naima had to return to Medbay immediately, as she was due for a further medical check-up. Lily had told him earlier that Naima would spend the night and the following day in Medbay, just in case there were any problems with the graft, but the urgency of the check-up was entirely spurious.

After a moment's pause, John and Luke had picked up on his cue, and they'd led a confused Lily from the room, while Gideon had invited his guests to join him on a tour of the bridge. They had accepted with enthusiasm, and after a very cursory glance at the main stations, the Captain had gestured for the three aliens to join him in the conference room. He'd left the door to the bridge slightly open, having surreptitiously arranged with Deborah for her to position herself outside. Now his preparations were complete, and he was ready to pry the truth out of the Kowes

"Thank you for joining me here. An issue has arisen that requires resolution, before we can proceed with your membership of the ISA. I'm sure we can resolve it quickly, but I need your co-operation." Gideon watched the Kowes carefully, but their fur-covered faces were difficult to read.

High Warrior Warik asked politely, "What issue is that, Captain? I thought we had reached an amicable agreement on terms."

Gideon nodded, again noting the Kowe's new-found fluency. "We had, but that was before I discovered that you were lying to me. Unless I hear some truth in this room in the very near future, then all bets are off, and you can forget your membership of the ISA."

The silence in the room lengthened as the aliens took in what Gideon had said. As he'd expected, Warik leaped down from his seat and marched up to the Captain, standing with his paws on his hips, his fur fluffed up in indignation, and his head tilted up as he growled ferociously, "How dare you make such allegations! What is your evidence for this accusation? Unless you can produce something to support such an inaccurate assertion, then our discussions are at an end! There is nothing the ISA can offer that can compensate us for such a slur on our reputations."

Gideon's commlink vibrated against his wrist and he gave Warik a shark-like smile. "There you go

again, lying through your teeth. I ought to warn you, High Warrior, that I have an infallible lie-detector available to me, and I can instantly identify an untruth. Now, would you care to try again? I think I know why you want to join the ISA. The Centauri have been expanding into your area of space, and they don't exactly have a good record for protecting the environment of any planet they occupy. They turned Narn from a fertile paradise into a barren desert during their occupation. You wouldn't want that to happen to your world, would you? But why couldn't you just tell us that? Why did you have to lie? And what's with the polar bears?"

Warik blustered and puffed, but eventually subsided and went into a huddle with his colleagues. Gideon waited patiently while they consulted, secure in the knowledge that he would know if they tried to lie again. Deborah was outside the door, listening to every word, and picking up every emotion. Gideon had set his wrist commlink to soundless vibration, and he'd arranged that she should activate it every time one of the Kowes told a lie.

After a few moments, the Kowes broke out of their huddle, and to Gideon's surprise, it was Mashik who took a step forward. Until now, the High Warrior's aide had said little, playing almost no part in the negotiations, and staying in the background. As the dark brown furred Kowe stepped forward, Gideon couldn't help notice how his body language had changed. Where before he had moved with head down and shoulders hunched, the picture of a subservient aide, now he stood proud and tall, and even though he had to look up at the Captain, somehow he gave the impression that their faces were on a level.

"It would appear that the time for deception is over, Captain, and the first deceit I should correct is my name. I am not Mashik, aide to Warik. I am Chieftess Urpta, leader of the Kowe race."

Gideon swallowed an exclamation of surprise, and couldn't help glancing at the Kowe's crotch, cursing the fact that the furry covering hid any evidence of the speaker's sex, but the lack of any sensation on his wrist indicated that the alien was telling the truth.

The Captain bowed from the waist, imitating the Kowes' usual gesture of respect. "Welcome aboard my ship, Chieftess. May I ask why you thought this deception was necessary?"

Urpta sighed noisily, and waved Gideon to sit. He decided to comply with her non-verbal request, and lowered himself into a seat, bringing their eyes more nearly on a level. The Chieftess looked at him seriously, her large, round brown eyes appearing utterly sincere as she said, "We did not know if we could trust you. We now believe we can." What Gideon could see of her face behind the fur crinkled into what appeared to be a smile. "I was warned that you would be difficult to fool, Captain. I was told you were unusually perceptive and would be able to detect any deceit. It seems the warning was correct."

Gideon raised an eyebrow, hiding his pleasure at the comment with a question. "Who told you that?"

Urpta shook her head and smiled again. "I never disclose my sources, Captain." She then went on to explain the reasons for the lies they had told.

Gideon listened as she described the secret her people had kept for millennia. They were not native to their planet, but had been transported there by an alien race, then genetically altered to suit their new environment.

"The aliens who abducted our forefathers changed our bodies and enhanced our minds, turning us from the mindless ferocity of our ancestors into the peace loving people we are today. It was a painful and prolonged transition, and in the process we nearly ruined our world, but sanity prevailed in the

end, and we made our planet into the paradise it is today. But we have often wondered about our origins, trying to imagine the incredibly hostile environment that turned our ancestors into the predatory killing machines they were when they arrived on Kowe. That puzzle was solved when we first saw records of your world, Captain."

Gideon nodded as comprehension finally dawned. "Polar bears. You think you're descended from polar bears."

Urpta bowed her head, and this time Gideon could see it wasn't a gesture of agreement. It was embarrassment that caused the Chieftess to hide her face. After a few moments of silence, she looked up and growled softly, "That is correct, but please understand, this is a matter of great shame to us, Captain. We need to analyze the genetic make-up of the bears to ascertain the truth, but to admit that we are descended from such animals is deeply humiliating. We did not wish you to know of our dishonor, so we fabricated the story we gave you, to hide our disgrace. We pretended to know little of your language, to help conceal our true intentions." The dark brown furred Kowe sighed deeply as she went on, "Now you know our shame, Captain. Will you reveal it to the universe?"

Gideon leaned back in his chair, considering. How much did the ISA really need to know? What harm was there in the Kowes' deception? His commlink hadn't vibrated at any time during Urpta's speech, so he knew it had been the truth. After a few moments, the Captain slowly shook his head.

"I don't see any reason why this information needs to go further, with one exception. I need to tell President Sheridan the truth, but other than that, you have my word that no one who doesn't already know will ever hear this information from me." That covered the fact that Deborah had been listening to every word, so Gideon went on, "I just need your assurances on one point. Humans also have parts of our history we're not proud of. One of those parts relates to medical experiments on living beings. All such experiments were forbidden many years ago. I need your assurances that any analyses you carry out on the bears we send you will be restricted to non-invasive procedures, which will in no way cause any of the animals distress of any kind. Do I have your promise on this?"

Urpta stepped close to Gideon and held out her paw, in a very human gesture. "We also abhor such experiments, Captain. You have my word."

Gideon took the paw and clasped it firmly. "Then we have a deal. It seems that like the recent addition to my First Officer's family, we needed to go through a little pain before our newest member could be delivered. Welcome to the ISA family, Chieftess Urpta."

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January 28th 2271

Lily's diary

*As much as I love to write with pen on paper, this entry won't be long. John and Luke are preparing the twins for bed--which will be very cramped tonight, as they insist on sleeping with us and Naima. It's a good thing we have a big bed, or someone (John or Luke, or both) would end up on the floor for sure!*

*Naima is finally home!*

*And she is drinking from me as I write; sucking so hard that it almost hurts. But it's a good ache, and*

*it tells me she's all right now. If not for the graft on her neck, no one would ever suspect that little more than two days ago, our baby darling was barely able to breathe. Thank you, Great Mother, for holding your protecting hand over her. I have learned my lesson, and for that I also thank you.*

*Every time I look at my Comfort, I feel relief, joy, and a fierce protectiveness. But I have felt much when linking with her that will help me to overcome that latter impulse. Even though she seems to have a less fiery character than Faylinn (but one less calm than Dasha), I have found strength and the ability to endure a lot inside her. Naima has gone through this trial and come out none the weaker for it.*

*The blessing ritual we held in Medbay this afternoon was wonderful. At one point I really had to bite my tongue though, or I'd have pointed out to Matthew that he'd crack the enamel on his teeth if he kept grinding them so hard.*

*It had started quite innocently, when Matthew remarked to Alwyn that it was lucky he and Sarah had arrived at the right time. Alwyn, with his best grandfatherly smile, assured him that it wasn't luck; they had known when they were needed.*

*Our Captain really should know better, but his curiosity always gets the better of him, so naturally he asked how they had known. Alwyn wouldn't say, of course, only telling Matthew in a rather snotty tone that it's a Technomage thing. For some reason, everyone but Alwyn and Demon suddenly pretended to be in deep in conversation during that whole exchange.*

*Oh and am I naughty for loving the expression on Matthew's face when John asked him if he wanted to hold Naima? (I can just hear Demon snort and say: "What else is new?")*

*The little party we held in Medbay afterwards ended quite, shall we say, interestingly, but I'm not complaining! Thank the Goddess that Luke can darken the windows of his office. I don't think John ever, in his whole career, got to work even half as late as he did today. My only regret is that my participation was restricted to what I could do with my mouth and hands. Then again, I can be quite creative when I want, and my men can always find new ways to please me.*

*Of course my dear eldest sister is almost certainly responsible, but something tells me that Alwyn and Sarah were also involved. Their sudden disappearance before the party was over was just too suspicious, especially since the two of them didn't even say goodbye before leaving for Earth. (Note: I'll have to thank them for whatever they did, the next time they visit.)*

*Four pairs of yarn ties are as yet untied on Naima's coverlet. This time Angel, her Goddess-Mother, was here, but Ilas, Dureena and Max couldn't come back so soon again, after their visit last month. And there is one more pair left for Alden Catches, who has become 'Uncle Alden' to Faylinn and Dasha over the year that has passed since he first came on board the Excalibur for the Jones investigation. He promised to come by and speak his blessing for Naima as soon as possible. We are very happy that he agreed to be her Goddess-Father. (Though if anyone had told me a year ago that a Mr. Jones would become the Goddess-Father of one of my children, I'd have laughed in their face!)*

*Alden's visits and calls are few and far between, but he has become a true friend to us. I think even Matthew has been able to put aside his suspicions--after all, even he can't deny that we owe the 'old telepath' a lot. My sisters and I will never be able to thank him enough for giving us the chance to live a free life--a life which he never had. To hear that Alden has now added teaching future Joneses to his duties, gives me hope. "If I can prevent even one of my pupils from becoming like Ines, I will have bettered the lives of many telepaths," he said. I will speak a special blessing for him tonight.*

*Oops, I hear the rascals are on their way! I'd better hurry, before I get into trouble for staying up too late. But then I don't want to delay--could there be anything more beautiful than to sleep safely surrounded by my lovers and children? So forgive me if I stop talking to you now, my friend. No doubt there will be much to tell over the coming weeks and months.*

*Tonight even more than at other times, I feel in our extended family there is enough love, light and happiness for the whole universe. May it spread to all who need it.*

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## **The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four H**

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