

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four N - Part 1: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardroom

by *The Space Witches*



Could you say no to a ride with this Angel?

Chapter 1

July 2272

Gideon drummed his fingers on the conference room table, waiting impatiently for the call to come through. A quick glance across at his First Officer did nothing to lessen his impatience. John Matheson looked as serene as he always did. Nothing ever seemed to stir that tranquil composure, which only provoked his impatient Captain into wanting to ruffle his Exec's feathers.

*The Captain started plotting. Just what duties could he assign John to unsettle that imperturbable façade? Making him Officer in charge of Technomage relations hadn't had any effect. John hadn't batted an eyelid when told to go find a fatted calf to kill. He'd even taken the role of chief peanut butter carrier for golden dragons in his stride. There must be *something* that would rattle John's cage. But if a dragon-owning, specter raising, card-carrying Member of the Technomage Society didn't phase John, then Gideon admitted to himself that he was almost afraid to find out what would rattle his Exec. Because he didn't want to see it in a dark alley heading his way.*

Before Gideon could think of anything suitably evil, but after deciding that he'd consult his sister-in-law, Angel, the chief author of all mischievous acts perpetrated on board the Excalibur, the viewscreen lit up. Front and center was a Minbari the Captain had never seen before, but he wore the familiar uniform of the Rangers, complete with the shoulder pin depicting human and Minbari forms holding a green, central jewel, the Isil'Zha.

Gideon suddenly wondered what the other species who had more recently joined the Rangers felt about that pin. Did the Drazi Rangers wear a different version? He was willing to give odds that the Pak'ma'ra insisted on having a pin with their own distinctive forms prominently displayed.

Pushing such thoughts aside as irrelevancies, Gideon stood, bowed his head a fraction of a centimeter in salute, and asked, "What can we do for you, Ranger..." He left the sentence unfinished, his inflection querying the Ranger's name.

"I am Ranger Durhan. President Sheridan has agreed that the Rangers may request your co-operation with a small problem we have at present, Captain Gideon." As he spoke, he nonchalantly waved Gideon



back into his seat. Despite Durhan's courteous words, the Captain found himself bristling at the arrogant tone used by the Ranger.

[Typical Warrior caste. Snotty bastards.] Gideon forced a smile to his face, covering his irritation. "It's always a pleasure to assist the Rangers with any little problems they have, Ranger Durhan. What can we do to help?" The Captain tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, but from the lift of John's eyebrow, which he caught from the corner of his eye, he was pretty sure he'd failed.

Durhan ignored the Captain's tone and went on to explain the nature of the Rangers' 'small problem'. It appeared that a human colony on the planet Aris, which had barely recovered from being bombed by the Earth Alliance during the civil war, was now being attacked by Raiders.

"Our informants advise us that the Raiders have somehow acquired significant new firepower, in the form of a ship that appears to have greater strength than an old Earthforce destroyer. We have agents working on the issue of how the Raiders acquired such a ship, but in the meantime, we need to provide protection for the people of Aris. We are reassigning a Whitestar to patrol the sector and defend the colony, but you are closer. Given your superior speed, you should be able to reach Aris before the Raiders can attack with their new ship."

As Durhan spoke, a data stream was transferred through the same communication channel, downloading all the information the Ranger was giving, and all the other data the Excalibur might need, onto a data crystal that Commander Matheson had prepared to receive it. As Durhan completed his verbal briefing, the First Officer removed the crystal and nodded at his Captain, indicating that the data transfer was complete.

Gideon reached across and took the data crystal, holding it up, revolving it between his fingers as he considered the Ranger's words, then he nodded.

"OK, we're on our way. Just one question, Ranger Durhan. Who are these informants and agents of yours? Are we likely to come across any of them?"

The Minbari Warrior's face cracked into a rare smile. "You never know, Captain. You might at that."

Before Gideon could ask another question, the connection was cut and the viewscreen went blank. Gideon shrugged and turned to his first officer. "OK, John. Let's get the ship turned around and see what trouble we can get into on Aris."

"We're receiving a distress signal, Captain."

John Matheson's words made Gideon look up abruptly from his command console, where he'd been studying the mission data transmitted by Ranger Durhan. They had been on their way to Aris for three hours, and were due to arrive early the following day. Based on the data Durhan had sent, this would give them a short time to prepare before the Raiders' next attack. The last things the Captain needed at this point were distractions and delays.

"Location and source?" Gideon snapped out the questions as he stood abruptly and moved to join his First Officer standing at the front of the bridge. The roiling red clouds of hyperspace seemed to pulse and glow through the viewscreen in front of them, but Gideon ignored the view, focusing on the data appearing on his Comm. Officer's board.

"They're in normal space, dead ahead. We should be able to drop out of hyperspace, pick them up, and jump back in without more than a few minutes delay. No significant detour required. It seems to be some sort of merchant cargo carrier, but a small one. It should fit inside the landing bay. Just." As usual, the Commander gave his Captain all the pertinent information, without superfluous details. John didn't bother to ask whether they should stop to rescue the disabled ship. Everyone on the Excalibur knew their Captain would never ignore a distress call. He never left anyone behind.

"OK, let's go get them." Gideon gave the order and moved back to his chair, sitting and summoning a graphic of the planned maneuver onto his command console. Having studied the course Helm and Navigation had plotted for the rescue Gideon leaned forward and activated the control which gave his authorization for the plan. He smiled wickedly as he added a further command. One that would stretch his people's skills a little.

While he waited for the ship to reach the appropriate point for them to drop back into normal space, the Captain pulled up the data about the ship they planned to rescue. Its transponder signal matched that of a cargo ship called 'Lion', registered to a Captain Malcolm Fillion. The Lion carried a crew of four: Captain, First Officer, Engineer and Weapons Officer. Gideon had no doubt they doubled up on other roles, too, but that was the basic roster for the ship.

They were registered out of Mars, and specialized in transporting small but precious cargos, which explained the unusually heavy weight of armament they carried. The Lion could match a much bigger ship in a firefight, and she had oversized engines, too. The only things she lacked, in common with all small ships except Whitestars, were jump engines, so she would be limited to routes connected by Jumpgates.

So what was she doing out there in the black, light years from the nearest Jumpgate? Gideon decided his curiosity would have to wait until they got the Lion on board, but then he would want to question this Captain Fillion closely. The ship's profile could just as easily match a smuggler as a trader, and smugglers often worked closely with the Raiders. This distress call could easily be an attempt to delay the Excalibur's

arrival at Aris. Well, it wouldn't delay them as long as anyone might think.

"Ready to jump, Captain." Commander Matheson turned and nodded at his Captain, who stood and strode to the front of the bridge.

"Jump."

A black hole appeared in the red of hyperspace, and the Excalibur dropped through.

"Oh hell!"

Malcolm Fillion's eyes opened wide as he saw the huge ship emerge from hyperspace and bear down on them. He'd heard of the Excalibur of course, and seen many pictures of it, but he'd never really appreciated just how damned BIG it was. It could swallow his tiny Lion and barely give a belch as they were digested. He couldn't even hope that the Lion would give the Excalibur indigestion.

"Mal, don't cuss a gift horse in the mouth. They're comin' to get us, ain't they? We're down to four hours of air. Be polite for once in your life."

Fillion grinned at his Engineer, who sat next to him in the Lion's tiny bridge. "I know, Teri, but you know how I feel about Earthforce. All those rules and regulations give me a headache."

Teri laughed, then coughed as the foul air in the cabin caught in her throat. Finally, she was able to choke out, "From what I've heard about the Captain of that ship, he ain't any fonder of the rulebook than you are, Mal. He just hides it better."

Fillion chuckled, careful not to breathe too deeply as he knew the air would only make him choke, as it had Teri. She was right, of course, as Teri nearly always was. Apart from being a damned fine engineer, Teri had a head full of sense on her well-rounded shoulders.



The Captain of the Lion had heard many stories about Matthew Gideon, starting with those circulated in Earthforce Academy, where Fillion had spent a few unhappy months before deciding that much as he loved space, there had to be an easier way to get there than putting up with the regimented ways of Earthforce.

By the time Fillion had dropped out of the Academy, Gideon was already a legend, known as the sole survivor of the Cerberus, where he'd been assigned after getting busted back to Ensign for running a questionable card school on the Vesta. Fillion had watched Gideon's career with some interest and envy after that, wondering how such a rebel and non-conformist managed to rise back through the ranks so quickly, finally getting made Captain of the Explorer ship, Phoenix, a job Malcolm Fillion would have given his right arm for.

Fillion's own career had taken a few odd twists and turns of its own during those years, and there were some things he'd done along the way that he wasn't entirely proud of. Even so, they'd helped him acquire a merchant Captain's ticket, and the Lion. Everything he did now was open and above board. Well, everything that could be checked.

When Gideon had been given the Excalibur, Fillion had wondered what sort of edge the Captain had. He

must have *something* to explain that meteoric rise. Whatever it was, Gideon had delivered, saving Earth from the Drakh plague and going on to work for the Inter-Stellar Alliance, commanding the biggest, most powerful ship in the galaxy.

The mile and a quarter long ship that was now bearing down on the Lion, looking as if she was about to ram them.

"Holy shit, Mal! They ain't stoppin'!" Teri let out a shriek of dismay as the Excalibur loomed closer and closer. The large, bulbous head of the ISA flagship thrust through space and skimmed over the top of the Lion so closely that Mal and Teri both ducked their heads instinctively. They froze in their seats as the cowling of the Excalibur's landing bay curved open in front of them, revealing the narrow opening into which the Lion would either pass or be crushed.

"He's a fucking lunatic!" Fillion screamed as he threw his arms over his head in a pointless gesture of self-defense.

"The Lion is secured and intact in the landing bay, Captain. Well, almost intact. We scraped a little paint off her hull as she came in." John Matheson could barely conceal his grin as he gave his Captain the report.

It wasn't the first time Gideon had ordered him to take another ship on board without stopping, but the Lion was bigger than a Starfury, so getting her into the landing bay in one piece had been more of a challenge. John loved a challenge, and his Captain loved to set them for him.

"Tsk tsk, Commander. I'll have to apologize for your poor marksmanship and send you down with a paint brush later. Get us back into hyperspace and up to speed again. We need to be at Aris by 08:00 tomorrow. I'll go say 'hello' to our visitors."

John smiled as Gideon left the bridge, and turned back to the viewscreen, watching as the Jump-point opened in front of the Excalibur and they surged through. A sudden thought occurred to the Commander, but a quick check on the Weapons station reassured him. G'Tan and his Marines were on their way to join the Captain in landing bay. Gideon wasn't giving John any excuse to say 'turnips' this time.

Gideon stood outside the doors to the landing bay, waiting impatiently for the pressure on the other side to rise, and for the oxygen levels to become breathable. G'Tan stood at his shoulder, a PPG rifle clasped in one large, black gloved hand. A hand large enough to make the rifle look more like a pistol. More of G'Tan's Narn Marines were ranged along the corridor behind them, making a well armed welcome party for the Lion's crew. After what had happened the last time Gideon had answered a distress call, he wasn't taking any chances. The fact that this set of visitors were human, not Drazi, made no difference.

As the panel at the side of the doors indicated that they could enter, Gideon turned to G'Tan and said, "As soon as I give the order, take them straight to the Brig. Strip them and search them there."

The doors slid open and Gideon's face stretched into a shark-like smile as he stepped through, closely followed by G'Tan and his Narns.

Four people stood at the top of the ramp that had been lowered from the Lion. Front and center stood a

man who looked as if he'd stepped out of an old western movie. He wore knee high boots over pale, tight pants, held up by suspenders. A dark shirt was covered by a knee-length coat, which opened at the front to show a gun belt slung around his hips.

Gideon felt a large hand descend on his shoulder and he was gently moved to one side. G'Tan moved to stand in front of him, giving a terse command to the four people on the ramp to drop their weapons or be fired on. The Captain couldn't help but smile, despite his irritation at being unable to see anything beyond G'Tan's broad back. The Narn Sergeant took his duty as the Captain's bodyguard very seriously. Gideon suspected it was because Deborah had told G'Tan exactly what she would do to him if he ever allowed any harm to come to her husband.

Hearing the clatter of belts and weapons hitting the floor, Gideon stepped around the large Narn, and looked at the other people standing higher up the ramp. A very well-rounded woman stood at the first man's shoulders. Her ship-suit looked as if it had been made for someone two sizes smaller than her, and she stretched it to splitting point in some less than flattering places.

Two other men stood slightly further back. One was tall and dark, and he glowered at the Marines standing below. He'd lifted his arms in surrender but he obviously wasn't happy about it. The last man was short and wiry, with spiky blond hair. He too had his arms raised, but he was trying to smile, despite his obvious fear.

Gideon cleared his throat. "Who's in command here?"

It didn't surprise him when the man in the long coat stepped forward. "I'm Malcolm Fillion, Captain of the Lion. Captain Gideon, I presume? Thanks for the rescue, but your welcome needs a little work." He waved his arm at the rank of Narns standing behind Gideon, all with weapons raised.

The shark-like smile emerged on Gideon's face again. "Oh, I haven't even begun. I'm afraid we've had some unfortunate experiences with people we've rescued before, Captain Fillion. We'll talk in more detail later, but for now, please be good enough to accompany my Marines. They'll take you somewhere safe, where we can search you. Thoroughly."

Fillion's throat bobbed as he took in what Gideon meant. His smile was a little forced as he replied, "That's not a request, is it?"

Gideon cocked his head to one side and he smiled again. "Not really. Of course, you don't have to comply. The exit is that way, if you'd like to leave now." He pointed to the opening through which the Lion had been drawn. The red of hyperspace was now visible through the force-fields which kept the atmosphere in place.

Fillion looked from the opening back to Gideon. "I guess maybe we'll stay awhile. Thank you kindly, Captain. Lead the way."

Gideon waved to his Marines and stood back, G'Tan still standing by his side, as the crew of the Lion was escorted out. When the last one had left, he said quietly to the large Narn, "Dr. Raven and some of his medical team will be in the Brig, waiting. They'll help you make sure there's no chance of these people carrying any weapons. Outside or in."

The two Captains sat across the table from each other, glaring. Gideon admitted to himself that Fillion

was pretty good at it, but the younger man lacked the years of experience Gideon brought to the game. The older Captain was willing to bet that he could out-brood the other Captain, too. Practice paid.



When Fillion's eyes flickered, Gideon hid a tiny smile and broke the silence. He could afford to be magnanimous in victory. "So tell me about your ship, your crew, your cargo and your destination."

Fillion sat back in his seat and lifted his eyes to meet Gideon's. There wasn't a trace of surrender or acknowledgement of defeat in those eyes. He grinned back at Gideon, saying, "You don't want much, do you?"

Gideon allowed a slow smile to spread across his face. "Call it the fee for your rescue. Your life must be worth that much. If it's not, you know where the exit is."

Fillion leaned forward again, clasping his hand together on the table. "OK, as fees go, it's not bad. And for your information, my life's worth a hell of a lot more than yours. I've got a price on my head on at least five planets to prove it."

Gideon gave a short bark of laughter and waved the other Captain to continue, listening carefully while Fillion spoke about his crew.

The blonde woman was Teri Stewart, a Mars-born engineer who'd worked with Fillion for years. She doubled as relief Helm on the Lion, although most of the time the Captain flew the ship himself.

The tall, dark man was called Scott Atkins, an Earther and fellow drop-out from Earthforce Academy. He'd only joined the crew of the Lion shortly before their last passage, as their First Officer and Navigator.

*The last member of the crew, acting as Supercargo and Weapons Officer, was Andrei Gagarin. "He insists that he's the ten times great grandson of Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, but who knows? He sure ain't related to the other famous Yuri: the one who was the first man married in space. There's no way our little Andrei is gonna be marrying *any* woman. He's damned good with weapons, which is all I care about. With the kind of cargo I haul, I need someone who can fix any weapon and fire it straight. Andrei can do both."*

Gideon nodded, absorbing the information he'd just been given, believing only what he'd been able to verify independently, which was most of it.

"Let's talk about your cargo, shall we? What are you carrying, and where were you headed?" Gideon leaned back in his own chair, putting his hands behind his head, showing himself to be completely relaxed and in control. It was easy to feel that way when G'Tan's giant form was looming over his shoulder with a PPG held ready.

Fillion considered for a moment, then decided to speak. It would have been pointless for him to have held his silence, anyway. Gideon had already ordered a search of the Lion. He wanted to be sure he hadn't taken another Trojan Horse on board his ship.

"We specialize in rare and valuable goods. We've got a mixed payload this trip, but the bulk of it is

well-aged Brevari. We've got fifty casks in the hold, all on their way to a wealthy connoisseur on Minbar."

Gideon shook his head. "I'll accept what you say about the cargo, but you can try again with the destination. It's not widely known, but Minbari have a low tolerance for alcohol. It's poison to them. There's no way a Minbari would want fifty casks of Brevari."

While he was speaking, Gideon made a silent vow that his wife should never find out about the Lion's load. A few month's earlier, she'd had her first taste of Brevari, and while the impact on her libido had been stimulating to say the least, she'd suffered from a hangover that had lasted for days afterwards. Gideon never again wanted to have to cope with Deborah when she had a headache like that one. Once she'd sobered up, she'd been cranky for days afterwards, and even worse, she had shown absolutely no interest in sex for as long as the headache had lasted.

Fillion smiled indulgently. "Minbari aren't the only people who live on Minbar, Captain. The ISA and the Centauri Empire may not be on the best of terms right now, but there's still some communication, and still some Centauri who travel outside the Empire. A few even prefer to live elsewhere. I'll give you the details and you can check, if you like."

Gideon passed the other Captain a datapad and watched silently while Fillion made some entries. He had no doubt that the story would hold up, but he was suspicious nonetheless. Any story which required the support of a Centauri was suspect. Whatever minor legal trading may go on between the ISA and the Empire, they were still officially the enemy. The type of trade in which Fillion and his crew were active could easily be a cover for smuggling other goods and--more importantly--information. What ISA secrets might Fillion be selling with his Brevari?

Fillion finished his entry and held the datapad out to Gideon, who took it and glanced at the contents, before placing it face down on the table. "I'll have this checked out later. Now, tell me how you came to be floating in the middle of nowhere, with your engines down and almost out of oxygen."

Gideon had received a report from the engineers he'd sent to examine the Lion, before he'd started to interrogate Fillion. The engineers had advised him that the Lion's engines were almost melted, and the oxygen recycling filters badly damaged. The crew would have died from suffocation within hours if they hadn't been rescued.

Fillion shook his head. "Damned if I know what happened. We went through the Jumpgate off Io with no problems, and we were navigating the beacons to Minbar. The route we were taking meant we had to drop out of hyperspace over Narn, then go back through their gate to pick up the beacons to Minbar. We filed a flight-plan. You can check it. We were on the second leg when we hit something. I have no idea what it was, but it knocked us off the beacon, straight into a vortex which pitched us out into normal space. I guess we were lucky. We'd never have been found in hyperspace."

Gideon nodded. "I guess you were." He stood and picked up the datapad from the table, having reached a decision. "I'll run a check on these details and your flight-plan. If they check out, I see no reason why we can't help you out. I have an engineering crew working on your ship now. They should be able to complete repairs by the time we arrive at our destination. There's a Jumpgate there, so you'll be able to resume your voyage and get to Minbar, although you'll be a little later than you planned."

Fillion stood and looked quizzically across at Gideon, asking, "Can you tell me where your destination is? Then I can work out just how late we'll be, and contact our buyer."

Gideon watched Fillion carefully as he said, "Aris," wondering if he'd get a reaction. What concerned him most about Fillion's story was that the route he'd described would have taken the Lion directly past the beacon for Aris' Jumpgate.

Fillion sighed, but gave no other indication of concern. "I'll just have to hope my buyers can't get another shipment before we arrive. Can Teri and I supervise the repairs, Captain? I'd rather not stay here in your Brig, if you don't mind. After the search your Marines carried out, this place doesn't have the fondest of recollections for me."

Gideon snorted a laugh. "I can understand that, but I'll have to ask you to stay here for a while longer." He turned and started toward the door, then stopped, pretending to have had an idea. Turning back, he said, "I tell you what. If all this checks out, by way of an apology, I'll invite you and your crew to join me and some of my senior officers for dinner this evening. How does that sound?"

Fillion smiled. "That sounds fine, Captain, but I'd like to dress in something more presentable, if I may? Can I get some other clothes from my ship?"

Gideon couldn't help but admire the attempt to get out of the Brig, but he was having none of it. He shook his head, saying, "Tell G'Tan what you need, and he'll arrange for your things to be brought here. I'll see you later."

The Captain spun on his heel and left the Brig, whistling softly to himself. A quiet dinner party should relax Fillion nicely. And he'd never know that the beautiful woman who'd be sitting next to him was the most effective lie detector in the galaxy.

Gideon smiled as he entered his quarters and saw his wife and son sitting on the floor together. Both heads were covered in blonde, shiny curls, although Deborah's hair was pushed back over her shoulders, as otherwise it would have fallen forward and covered the coloring book she and Marcus were working on.

When the two faces he loved most in the universe looked up at him, Gideon started to laugh. "You two are as bad as each other." Deborah and Marcus both had multi-colored daubs of chalk covering their faces and hands and Gideon couldn't wait to see his son's latest masterpiece. He hoped that this time he could recognize whatever it was supposed to be, because last time he'd said 'It's a great spaceship, Marcus,' it had turned out to be a picture of Trulann..

Marcus leaped to his feet and ran toward the door, yelling, "Daddy!"

Gideon resigned himself to being equally well coated in chalk. By the time he'd lifted Marcus up into the air, given his son a hug, then taken his wife into his free arm and kissed her thoroughly, the Captain knew that his own face and clothes were covered in the same rainbow hues.

He sat on the sofa with Marcus on his knee, Deborah snuggled against his side, and listened while Marcus told him about what they'd been doing that day. It seemed that having gotten Marcus thoroughly over-excited during an energetic game of 'tag' on the basketball court, Deborah had brought their son back to their quarters to calm him down with some quiet coloring. Gideon listened patiently as Marcus told him all about the pictures he and his mother had colored together, while Deborah leaned into his side, her hand



laid on his thigh, a warm reminder of her presence and a silent promise of what might be to come.

When Marcus finally ran out of words, Gideon told Deborah about the plans he had made for the evening. Marcus pouted a little when he was told that it would be too late for him to stay up and meet their visitors, but he perked up when he realized that he would get to spend the night with his cousins, Dasha, Faylinn and Naima.

"John will be on duty on the bridge tonight, so Luke and Lily agreed to baby-sit for us. I want this to be a quiet dinner in the wardroom, just a few of the senior staff and us. I don't want anything to distract you from sensing whether this guy, Fillion, is on the level."

Deborah nodded quietly. It wasn't the first time Gideon had asked her to help him with his duties, and while she had some qualms about using her abilities in an underhand way, when the end result could affect the safety of the ISA, she was always ready to assist.

"What about Angel? Would it be OK if she joined us?"

Gideon was a little surprised by his wife's request. "Is she well enough? I thought she was still getting over that bout of Ionian flu."

Deborah nodded and snuggled closer, curling herself up against Gideon's side. He hugged her closer to him, then took the opportunity to slide his hand under her arm, cupping her breast in his palm. Running his fingertips lightly over Deborah's nipple, he was rewarded by the feel of it stiffening through her shirt.

A little intake of breath was the only sign of Deborah's arousal, as she answered, "Angel's feeling a little stronger today. I dropped around to see her this afternoon, and she said she was getting bored cooped up in her quarters. I think she'd enjoy some company." Leaning her head closer to Gideon's, Deborah ran her tongue lightly around his ear, then whispered, "And if you keep doing that, Lily could find herself babysitting a little earlier than she'd expected."

Gideon smiled lasciviously, then looked down at his son, still sitting contentedly on his father's knee, hugging his favorite bear, Half-Ted, closely. "How would you like to have supper with Dasha? Go get your pajamas and I'll take you over there now."

Marcus gave his parents a happy smile and slid off his father's knee, heading for the bedroom. Deborah chuckled softly, again running her tongue around Gideon's ear as she whispered, "We are very bad parents. I'm sure we're not supposed to dump our son on our family every time we want sex."

Gideon turned and caught Deborah's mouth with a bruising kiss, then released her, saying, "I'll take Marcus over to Lily's, you call Angel, and when I get back...We have about an hour before dinner. Let's not waste it."

"Here take these," said Luke, handing Angel a couple of white tablets and a glass of water. When he saw the expression on her face, he chastised her, "And don't pout. You want to get better, don't you?"

Grumbling, Angel took the tablets and water. "But I've already started to feel better..." she began,

argumentatively, until she saw the look on Luke's face. "I just don't like taking tablets. They always make me feel like I'm going to throw up," muttered Angel, eyeing the pills with disgust.

Luke looked at her sympathetically. "I know, but this is the only thing that will help prevent a relapse, which you know has been happening with this Ionian flu. Now go on, be a good girl and take your medicine."

Angel gave him a scowl and then popped the tablets into her mouth, quickly taking a long swig of the water to wash them down. "These had better help," she said unhappily.

"They will," said Luke as he put his arm around her shoulders. "Now for being such a good girl and taking your medicine, I've got a treat for you." Angel looked up at her friend curiously, and then broke into a grin as Luke pulled a lollipop from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

Laughing, Angel took it, pulled off the wrapper and popped it into her mouth, "Hmmm, cherry. My favorite," she mumbled around the lollipop in her mouth.

Luke chuckled, "Did no one ever teach you that it's not ladylike to talk with your mouth full?"

Pulling the sweet treat from her mouth, Angel grinned up at him cheekily. "Whoever said I was a lady?"

Luke burst out laughing, "You're as bad as Lily!"

"Thank you," grinned Angel.

Laughing, they both walked over to the sofa and sat down. "So, did you hear all about the goings on with this ship the Captain has scooped up into the Excalibur?" asked Luke, while Angel sucked on her sweet.

Angel nodded, then removed the lollipop before speaking, "Yup, in fact I've been asked to join Matthew and Demon tonight. They've invited some members of the crew to a party in the wardroom."

"Yes, I heard about that," said Luke.

"Will you be joining us?" asked Angel.

Luke shook his head, "John is on duty tonight, so Lily and I offered to baby-sit," he explained.

"That's a pity. It's been such a long time since we had guests or a party," said Angel sadly, before going on to ask, "Do you think it will be all right for me to go? I'm not contagious anymore, am I?" She hoped she wasn't. It had been a while since she'd been to a party, and after having been sick and cooped up for the past few days, she was itching to get out and have some fun.

Luke smiled, "You're past the contagious stage, and the medication is fast acting, so by tonight you should be feeling well enough to go."

"Excellent," said Angel, happily.

Luke laughed gently at her excitement but cautioned her. "Just one thing. Don't drink any alcohol, not even a glass of wine. It won't react well with the medication."

Angel's grin broadened. "Don't worry, Doc. It's the dancing I'm interested in, not the alcohol. I'm going with Lieutenant Roberts. He may be gayer than springtime in Paris, but he's the best dancer on the Excalibur." She paused, then added, "Apart from John, of course."

Luke laughed, saying, "I should think so!" as he started to rise from the sofa. "I'd better get back."

"Of course," said Angel, standing to join him as he walked to the door.

Luke paused long enough to plant a brief kiss on her cheek, "You have fun tonight, but don't overdo it, even if you are feeling better, OK?"

"I'll be good," said Angel, before popping the lollipop in her mouth and batting her eyelashes at him.

"Oh boy..." laughed Luke.



Giggling, Angel removed the sweet and waved to Luke, "Bye, Doc. See you later."

Shaking his head and muttering something about impossible sisters, Luke left. When the door had closed, Angel turned, popped the sweet in her mouth and headed for her bedroom.

[Now, what shall I wear?]

As he walked into the bedroom, Gideon paused, smiling as he watched his wife fixing her hair as she looked in the mirror. She had twisted her mass of blonde curls into a plait, and was now pinning it to the back of her head with a decorative grip. As always, little tendrils of hair escaped and cascaded down Deborah's long, elegant neck, drawing Gideon's lips like a magnet.

He moved to stand behind her, kissing the nape of her neck gently, as he placed his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. Deborah caught his eyes in the mirror and smiled. She gestured at herself and asked, "Is this all right? I didn't think you wanted anything too formal."

Gideon looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled again. Deborah wore a simple, black, knee length dress, with narrow straps leaving her shoulders bare. The dress followed the outline of her body without clinging, but it did nothing to hide her long legs, encased in the sheer black stockings he loved so much, the curve of her hips, the narrowing of her waist, and the swelling of her generous breasts. The dress was cut low enough at the front to show an enticing cleavage, and as usual she wore no jewelry other than the rings Gideon had given her.

"You'll do." Gideon knew he didn't have to say more. The wonderful thing about being married to an empath was that she would feel the depth of his admiration without him ever having to try and find words to express it. He ran his hands down her flanks and paused as he reached her hips.

Moving his hands up and down over the curve of her waist, Gideon gave Deborah a frown. "You're not wearing any panties, are you?"

Deborah flashed him a mischievous smile. "They spoil the line of the dress. I'll be careful how I sit."

Gideon groaned quietly and dropped his head to kiss her shoulder. "Do you know what this is going to do

to me? I'll spend the whole evening visualizing what you're going to look like when I get back here and unfasten this zipper." He moved his hand to the fastening at the back of her dress and tugged gently. "I'm getting hard just thinking about you standing in front of me in your stockings and nothing else."

Deborah laughed and turned quickly in his arms, kissing him long and slow. Gideon found the zipper with his fingers again, and started to gently draw it down her back. His wife pulled away, shaking her head at him as she said, "Later. We don't have time now."

Gideon sighed regretfully, knowing she was right, and watched as she refastened her dress and held her hand out toward him. "Shall we go?"

He smiled and took her hand, saying, "OK, Nelly-no-knickers, let's go party."

Demon walked into the wardroom, holding her husband's hand tightly. For the moment, she was maintaining the blocks John had helped her learn how to put in place, so she wouldn't always sense what everyone around her was feeling. She looked around with interest, as this wasn't a room they used very often, and in theory the Captain could only enter when invited. With John Matheson on duty on the bridge, the Second Officer, Lieutenant Christina Jackson was technically hosting the evening's events, albeit at her Captain's suggestion.

Supposedly reserved for the senior officers on board, it was deserted most of the time, as the senior staff generally preferred either to eat in their quarters, or to dine with the crew. Hence the wardroom was only used when holding more intimate parties for a small number of visitors, rather than the larger, diplomatic receptions they more often had to host on board the Excalibur.

A quick glance around showed that several of the senior team had arrived before them. Christina Jackson, who had issued the invitation to the Captain and his wife to join her at the party, was wearing civilian dress, as was Lieutenant JG Sangeetha Siddhartha, who stood at the Second Officer's side. Sangeetha was wearing the most beautiful deep-red sari, and looked very exotic, with her hair braided intricately and jewelry covering her hands, arms and even her face. The delicate nose ring the young Lieutenant wore only enhanced her exotic beauty.

Ankaren, the Brakiri Chief Sensor Operator, was accompanied by one of the other Brakiri on the crew, a young engineer called Karthanen. These four would soon be joined by G'Tan and his escort for the night--Demon smiled as she wondered which of the many willing volunteers would be lucky enough to be selected--and Lieutenant Roberts, the Sensor Operator, who would be acting as Angel's escort for the evening. Roberts was very handsome, a wonderful dancer, and Angel always enjoyed his company, so he made a perfect choice as a companion for a quiet evening's entertainment.

The four people from the Lion would make a total of fourteen sitting around the large oval table that stood at one end of the wardroom. A large enough number to make the evening interesting, but small enough so that Demon should have no difficulty focusing her attention on Captain Fillion, and sensing when he was telling the truth.

After admiring the outfits the females present had chosen, and having told Ankaren that he was as outrageously handsome as always, Demon's attention was caught by the sound of more people entering the room behind them. Their guests had arrived.

Malcolm Fillion looked around curiously as he walked into the room where the 'quiet' dinner with the Captain of the Excalibur was to take place. It was a handsomely appointed room, with pictures of planets, taken from space, hanging on the walls. Fillion smiled as he realized that each picture represented the home planet of a member race of the Inter-Stellar Alliance. A nice touch.

His attention was soon drawn away from the room itself to the people standing inside. He blinked several times as he realized he was surrounded by beautiful women. The tall, dark beauty introduced herself as the ship's Second Officer, and the tiny, exotic piece of loveliness at her side was apparently the Communications Officer. Fillion found himself wondering how Gideon ever got any work done with these distractions on his bridge.

The riddle was explained when Gideon introduced the tall blonde standing beside him. "Captain Fillion, may I introduce you to my wife, Deborah." If Gideon was going home to that every night, he probably never even noticed the other women on the ship.

Fillion tried not to stare at the Captain's wife, but it was hard. [Dammit, it's not the only thing that's gonna be hard around here, if you don't drag your eyeballs out of her cleavage, Mal!] The simple dress Deborah Gideon wore did little to conceal her spectacular body, but Fillion found that his enthusiasm waned as he looked at her face. Her features were beautiful, but the firm chin, high cheekbones and long nose held an expression of cool imperiousness that quelled his ardor.



Then she smiled.

Fillion was convinced he was starting to blush as he saw the warmth in the tall blonde's golden-brown eyes. She spoke softly, in a deep, slightly husky voice, with a strong English accent that sent shivers down his spine. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Captain Fillion."

Before he could untangle his tongue enough to respond coherently, Deborah Gideon moved from her husband's side, and took Fillion's arm. He could feel the heat of her hand right through the material of his coat, and he began to wish he'd worn something lighter. [It's suddenly gotten *really* hot in here!]

While the Narn Marines who had guarded him and his crew had refused to let them go back to the Lion to change, they had brought the clothes he'd requested, and allowed him to change in private. The big Sergeant had then escorted him and the others to the wardroom, backed up by an equally large female Narn, who although dressed up for an evening out, looked quite capable of snapping Fillion's neck like a twig, if she so desired.

The Captain of the Lion had decided that discretion was the better part of valor, so he had complimented the female--[No'Kar, her name is No'Kar.]--on her appearance, gave his crew a quick but significant glance, indicating that they should stay quiet and follow his lead, and followed No'Kar from the Brig.

Fillion looked up from his arm to Deborah Gideon's face and he swallowed quickly. She was smiling at him again. He wished she wouldn't do that. It made his knees go wobbly. She spoke softly again, in that sexy, husky voice, "I do love your clothes, Captain. It's a wonderful style. What planet do you come from? I'd love to hear all about it. Before I met my husband, I didn't get to travel much, so I love to hear about far-flung, exotic places."

A wave of warmth swept through Fillion, and as Deborah Gideon steered him gently across the room to a sideboard where she collected a drink and passed it to him, for some reason he felt ten meters tall. This gorgeous woman was smiling up at him as if he was the most interesting person in the universe, and suddenly he felt she was right. He gave her his very best smile, and started to tell her the story of his life.

Gideon stood next to Christina Jackson and smiled as he saw the impact Deborah was having on Fillion. He was putty in her hands, and she'd soon know all about him. Turning to Jackson, he said quietly, "Did you get the seating plan I suggested?"

Jackson nodded, and then tilted her head toward the table. "Just like you asked. Demon is opposite you, with Fillion on her right. You have the Engineer, Stewart, on your right, and Angel on your left. Atkins is on Demon's left, so when she's finished turning Fillion inside out, she can start on him."

The Second Officer grinned at her Captain, knowing exactly what he'd asked his wife to do that evening. Deborah's abilities weren't common knowledge among the crew, but Jackson was one of the privileged few who knew the secret. "It's not really fair, you know. When Demon smiles like that, she could get any man to tell her whatever she wants to know, even without her powers."

Gideon laughed softly. "She can certainly twist me around her little finger, any time she wants. Now, where are Angel and Roberts? Everyone else is here."

The door hissed open as he spoke, and Gideon found that for a few moments he forgot to breathe. Angel walked in, her hand on Roberts' arm, wearing a red dress that looked as if it had been sprayed onto her perfect body. The thin straps left her shoulders bare, with a neckline cut so low it barely covered her nipples. Following the line of her body, the dress curved into the waist, then flared out into a full skirt, which swirled around Angel's knees. High, spike-heeled, red shoes completed the outfit, which made Gideon want to throw back his head and howl.

Sudden visions of what it would be like to toss Angel onto her back and tear the dress off that perfect body filled Gideon's mind. He wondered if she, like her sister, had decided to abandon her panties for the night. The image that thought left in his mind made his groin ache, and he quickly pushed the notion aside. Gritting his teeth and plastering a smile on his face, Gideon stepped forward and took Angel's hand.

"You look beautiful, Angel. I'm delighted to see you so well recovered." The thought that he'd love to see her well uncovered, too, swept through Gideon's head but was ruthlessly suppressed.

Angel looked up at him and gave him a lovely smile, her bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief, sending another throbbing surge of blood to the Captain's groin. "I feel wonderful, Matt. Luke gave me something to give me a boost, and I'm raring to go. We'd better have some dancing after dinner, or I'll pout."

Gideon laughed and took her arm from Roberts, steering her toward the dinner table. "As long as you don't expect me to dance. I'm sure the Lieutenant here will be delighted to oblige."

He watched as Angel's eyes shifted and she caught her first glimpse of their visitors. Her eyes brightened and sparkled even more as she focused on Malcolm Fillion, still standing talking to Deborah.

Angel licked her lips and smiled a predatory smile. "Oh, you're safe enough tonight, Captain. I think I just found myself a new partner."

Gideon narrowed his eyes. Angel had better be talking about dancing.

Demon glanced at the man sitting to her right, and she couldn't help but smile. It was fortunate that she'd got everything she needed out of Fillion before they'd sat down to dinner. The Captain of the Lion had taken one look at Angel, sitting opposite him, next to Matthew, and his jaw had fallen open. Demon had the distinct feeling that she'd just become invisible. While Fillion hadn't actually drooled, he looked like a stunned puppy dog with his tongue hanging out.

The tall blonde was used to the effect her sister had on men, so she'd taken it in her stride, chuckled quietly to herself and turned her attentions to Fillion's First Officer and Navigator. Scott Atkins was a very different person to his Captain. Demon had quickly come to the conclusion that she didn't like the man at all.



While Fillion's lust was open and admiring, Atkins sent darting glances across the table at Angel, then when he spoke to Demon, he never met her eyes. He shifted his glance from her cleavage to her bare shoulders, down her arms to the rings she wore on her left hand, then up to her breasts again. Demon found it hard not to squirm under his scrutiny. She felt as if something cold and slimy was moving over her body.

No, she didn't like Atkins at all.

The only thing the Captain and the First Officer of the Lion appeared to have in common was that they were both hiding something. There all resemblance ended. Fillion had been open and honest, cheerfully telling stories about his upbringing on a colonial planet where modern technology had been abandoned, and the people farmed the old fashioned way, with horses and mules. Fillion had laughed as he'd told Demon that by the age of eighteen he'd seen enough of the back end of a mule to last him a lifetime, and he'd run away with the next ship to call, and joined Earthforce.

Demon knew he must have been bright to pass the Officer training entrance exams, but he hadn't been able to tolerate the discipline and had dropped out of the Earthforce Officer Training Academy. As she'd listened to him, Demon was inevitably reminded of her husband. The two men had much in common, and she'd warmed to the younger man as a result. That didn't stop her reading him like a book. She knew everything he'd told her was the truth, but he had stopped at certain points, changing the direction of his story abruptly. He was definitely hiding something.

When Fillion had become completely distracted by Angel, Demon had turned her attention to Atkins, but with little success except to make herself feel creepy. Smiling across the table at her husband, who was watching and listening to Angel and Fillion with a glower on his face, Demon took a deep breath and tried one last time to open Atkins up. She smiled at him warmly, and sent a wave of calm reassurance at him, trying to boost his confidence, telling herself that the man might just be shy.

Atkins responded with a sly grin, and slid his hand onto her leg. Demon shuddered and lifted her knee abruptly, trapping the wayward hand between her thigh and the hard edge of the table. Pushing upwards with increasing pressure, she smiled into Atkins' face as it paled in pain and said sweetly, "Perhaps my husband will ask you to play poker later, Mr. Atkins. Then you can lose another hand."

With one last, sharp push upwards, which brought a gasp of pain from her victim, Demon dropped her knee, and turned away. [Odious man!]

Angel watched Fillion talking to Demon, and smiled to herself. She'd been aware of him watching her during dinner. Hell, she'd been doing a fair amount of staring herself, since she'd first noticed him. The man was attractive to say the least, thought Angel, as she took a sip of wine.

The young witch continued to watch Captain Fillion, and several times he'd looked up at her briefly, a smile playing across what Angel had decided was a very kissable mouth, as he'd caught her watching him.

Angel took another sip of wine. She was feeling very warm and very merry. Music started to play and several people started to dance in the center of the room. [I wonder if the good Captain can dance,] Angel thought, tapping her feet under the table in time with the music.

"Would you like to dance, Angel?" asked Lieutenant Roberts, stopping Angel just as she was about to lean forward and ask Captain Fillion if he'd care to dance.

She turned and smiled at her partner for the evening and patted his hand, "Would you think badly of me, Andrew, if I said 'no'?" Her eyes flicked across at Fillion, before turning back to Roberts. "There's someone else I'd like to have the first dance with."



Andrew's eyes darted in Fillion's direction, before turning toward Angel and whispering so only she could hear. "I don't blame you. He's gorgeous."

Angel giggled and whispered back, "So you've been eyeing him out as well?"

Andrew blushed slightly "Do you blame me?"

Laughing softly, Angel shook her head. "Not at all." She wondered if Andrew had spent the evening doing what she had been doing--picturing what Fillion looked like naked. She didn't doubt it for a moment.

"Go on, you'd better ask him before someone else does," grinned Andrew, "and if he doesn't like girls, send him my way."

Laughing softly, Angel gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before she turned her attention back to Fillion. She turned just in time to catch him watching her with a look she recognized instantly--mutual attraction.

Pleased, Angel smiled and leaned across the table, "Captain Fillion, do you dance?"

"Please call me Mal," encouraged Fillion, with a soft drawl.

A shiver of desire flowed through Angel at Mal's tone. In that moment she felt as if no one else was in the room. If anyone else at the table was watching them and noticing their attraction to each other, Angel didn't see.

"Mal, do you dance?" repeated Angel seductively.

"Would you be asking?" Asked Mal softly.

"I would," replied Angel.

Without another word Mal stood, excused himself to Demon and Jackson, and moved around to Angel's side of the table.

Turning in her chair, Angel looked up at him as he bowed and held out his hand to her. "Shall we?"

Taking his hand, Angel rose from her chair and smiled as Captain Fillion led her to the dance floor. She knew that dancing wouldn't be the only thing she would be doing with him tonight. [At least if I have my way,] thought Angel, as Mal took her in his arms and swept her into their first dance.

Demon turned and smiled as her husband seated himself beside her. The smile faded as she sensed his displeasure. Reaching out, she took his hand and asked softly, "Is something wrong, Matthew?"

"There could be," he responded, as his eyes drifted to the dance floor. Demon followed his gaze and realized he was watching Angel and the Captain of the Lion as they danced. "Your sister. She's drunk," Matthew stated, his eyes never leaving the couple.

Demon laughed softly, "Don't be silly, Matthew. Angel's only had half a glass of wine. That's nowhere near enough to make her drunk."

Matthew waved his hand in Angel's direction, "That's as maybe, but she is. Just look at her. She's giggling like a school girl and flushed-both signs that she's tipsy."

"Matthew, Angel's just enjoying herself, and what you're seeing could just as easily be signs of her attraction to Captain Fillion. Let her have some fun for once," responded Demon quietly.

Matthew snorted, "Well, before she has too much fun and causes trouble, I suggest you link with her and tell her it's time to call a halt to the festivities."

Withdrawing her hand, Demon said calmly, "That's unkind, Matthew. Angel is having a good time. Let her be. She deserves this after having been ill."

Matthew snorted again, "Deborah, this is Angel we're talking about. 'Trouble' thy name is Angel!" He misquoted, shook his head and went on, "I know what you're like when you get drunk, remember? I just know Angel will be a damn sight worse!" He growled out the words.

Demon glanced quickly around the table, making sure that no one was overhearing their whispered exchange. Fortunately, everyone appeared distracted with their own conversations. Only Atkins was silent, and his eyes were fixed on the dance floor where Fillion and Angel held each other close as they danced to the slow music that was now playing. Demon shuddered as she felt Atkins' lechery when he looked at her sister. Did the man lust after every woman he saw?

Suppressing her annoyance at Matthew's reference to the Brevari incident, she whispered, "Please, keep your voice down." Demon sighed and went on, "Matthew, what's behind this? You're being a little

unreasonable." She took hold of her husband's hand again, and squeezed it gently, trying to send soothing feelings to him, without her sending being felt by anyone else.

She felt Matthew calm a little, as he looked at her and smiled gently, "I'm sorry, love. It's just...I don't trust Fillion, and Angel seems very interested in him. If she's drunk, she may not be in total control of herself or her actions. I just don't want her to do anything she'll regret later or more importantly, something that I have to clean up after."

Demon smiled. "Matthew, don't worry so much. Angel can take care of herself." She paused and leaned in to whisper into her husband's ear. "She's a telekinetic, remember? If Fillion tried to do anything she didn't want, or which might hurt the ship, she'd flatten him." Leaning back, she continued, "So there really is nothing to be concerned about. Besides, Angel is clearly attracted to Fillion. I doubt if there's anything he wants right now that she doesn't. Just let them be, and let Angel have her fun."

*"I'm sorry, Deborah. I'm not sure Fillion and Angel getting so friendly is a good idea," Matthew's voice was as stubborn as his expression, making Demon want to shake some sense into him. He went on before she could say anything. "Dammit, Deborah! I know Fillion is up to something and you know full well why we're here. I have enough on my hands with keeping an eye on him, his crew and what's happening on Aris. I don't need to be worrying about dragging your sister out of the trouble she *always* seems to get herself into. So just call her over and get her out of here!" By the time he finished his sentence, Matthew was hissing his words from between his clenched teeth, and he was as angry as he had been earlier.*

Demon hissed back. "That's not fair and you know it! If you want to spoil the evening, then go ahead. Tell G'Tan to take the Lion crew back to their ship or to the brig. I won't even try to talk you out of it, but don't ask me to do your dirty work for you!" By now the tall blonde had to work to make sure her emotions didn't escape her control. Another surreptitious check around the table at least assured her that so far the Gideons' marital sniping had gone unobserved.

"She's your sister," said Matthew, mulishly.

"I'm not my sister's keeper, Matthew Gideon, and neither are you!" snapped Demon, feeling angry enough to want to smack her husband. Hard!

"Where the hell do they think they're going?" Matthew hissed as he stood abruptly, his eyes blazing in the direction of the dance floor. Demon stood and followed his gaze. Angel and Fillion were making their way off the dance floor and heading out of the wardroom. "I don't think so," said Matthew, starting to go after them.

Demon grabbed his arm and stopped him short. "Please, Matthew, don't!" she warned softly.

*Gideon turned to her, his jaw clenched as he ground his teeth. "I'm not going to let that man go wandering around my ship with Angel. You seem to have forgotten, Deborah, that I'm still Captain of this ship and I give the orders. I will *not* allow Fillion full, unescorted access to my ship!"*



It took every bit of self control Demon possessed not to tell her husband that he could shove his head up his own ass for his comment about being the Captain. Did he really think she didn't know that? Matters were fast getting out of control and one of them had to keep a level head. Taking a deep breath, she reached out her hand and

placed it on Matthew's arm, pulling him closer to the sound system, trying to ensure that no one could overhear their argument. She then said quietly, "He's not unescorted, Matthew. Angel's with him. You have to trust her. She won't let anything bad happen to your ship or your crew."

Matthew pulled free from Demon's grasp. "No, she won't, because I'm going to stop them. Then I'm going to kick Fillion off my ship."

"No! I'm serious, Matthew. Let them alone," said Demon, her tone soft but icy as her control over her temper began to slip.

Her anger must have been apparent to her husband, because he paused, but Demon could see that he wasn't going to let it go. He sighed, saying, "Fine, I won't stop them. But neither am I going to let Fillion roam around my ship without someone watching him, even if he is with Angel."

Demon wasn't given a chance to argue as Matthew walked over to where No'Kar was standing. He whispered something to the Marine, who nodded and then left the wardroom quickly. Demon had no doubt that her husband had ordered No'Kar to go after Angel and Fillion, and keep an eye on them.

Her arms folded, Demon waited for her husband to return to her side. When he did, she kept her face impassive, but hissed angrily, "I don't suppose 'invasion of privacy' means anything to you?" She was pretty sure she knew why Angel and Fillion had left, and she knew that her sister and her soon-to-be-lover wouldn't want an audience. While Demon knew Matthew had every right to prevent a man he didn't trust wandering the Excalibur at will, she wasn't happy about him sending a spy after her sister. [Please, Angel. Whatever you do, take Fillion back to your quarters.] At least there, they'd have some semblance of privacy.

For a moment, Demon considered linking with her sister and warning her to take Fillion to her rooms, but she stopped herself. She knew she'd have to give Angel an explanation, and if her sister knew what Matthew was doing, it would lead to another of their infamous fights. That was the last thing Demon wanted.

"The safety of my ship and its crew has the highest priority, Deborah. You know that!" replied Matthew, cutting into Demon's thoughts.

"I know that, Matthew, but I also suspect there's more to this than you being worried about the safety of your ship and your crew," she shot back, just for a moment losing control over her temper.

A pulse in Matthew's jaw began to jump as he asked, "And what do you mean by that?" He tensed and Demon felt a wave of guilt and anger wash over her. Matthew's guilt and anger. Her heart sank. She hated fighting with her husband, but she also hated how unreasonable he could be when it came to Angel. One thing she was sure of: this wasn't the time or the place to go into that subject. Clearing her throat, Demon said quietly, "Matthew, I think maybe we should go home and talk about this, don't you? We don't want your crew and our guests to know we're fighting."

For a moment, she thought he was going to argue, but then he nodded and said tensely, "Yes, maybe we should."

Turning, Demon smiled at their guests, still seated around the dinner table, apparently oblivious to their hosts' argument. "If you'll excuse us, my husband and I will bid you goodnight. Thank you for your company this evening"

Voices of understanding echoed around the table. Teri Stewart stood and walked over to Demon to thank them for their hospitality, on behalf of the Lion's crew.

Demon nodded and Matthew said quietly, "You're welcome. G'Tan will see you to the accommodations we've prepared for you. If you need anything, let him know." His voice was calm and polite, but Demon could sense all his anger and guilt seething below the surface. The tension between them was almost palpable, and she could only hope that no one in the room could sense it, although a quick glance at Christina Jackson made her realize that the Second Officer at least has sensed something was wrong.

Matthew turned to Demon, saying quietly, "Shall we?" Without another word he turned on his heel and left the room, leaving Demon to follow, quietly seething.

*Mal knew he shouldn't have left the wardroom without Gideon's permission. He had no doubt that the Captain of the Excalibur wouldn't want a stranger wandering his ship. But Mal *had* left the wardroom, and why had he done that? Because he was unable to resist the irresistible, like a moth drawn to a flame. [Be honest, you were being led by your dick.] Yeah, so that was true, but he was a man after all and he couldn't be faulted for being attracted to a beautiful woman, could he?*

Now Mal found himself in the Excalibur's bullet car tube, sitting pillion on a replica of a 20th Century motorcycle, which Angel had explained belonged to Gideon and his wife. He was there because she'd gotten it into her beautiful head to go for a ride.

As soon as she'd mentioned who owned the motorcycle, Mal knew he should have high tailed it back to the wardroom. But no, once again he'd been unable to resist Angel as she'd looked up at him with those stunning electric blue eyes. Then she'd smiled and said it would be fun. Hell, he couldn't disagree with that. What man could say 'no' to riding such a magnificent machine with a woman as sexy and alluring as Angel? [Clearly not you, Malcolm Fillion!]

Earlier, when they'd arrived in the tube, Mal had asked Angel if Gideon would be upset about them taking his bike for a joyride. Angel had said, "No, of course he won't." Now sitting with his arms around Angel's waist and sensing her excitement, Fillion had his doubts. In his line of work, Mal had gained a fine sense about people, and he sensed Angel to be a person who enjoyed doing things she shouldn't.

"Ah, Angel, are you absolutely positive Captain Gideon won't mind us taking his bike for a ride?" asked Mal, above the sound of the engine.

He felt rather than heard Angel's soft laughter, before she said, "Absolutely not. Especially if he never finds out about it."

Mal's words of protest were cut short and replaced by a startled yell, as the bike suddenly shot forward. He only saved himself from being propelled off the back by tightening his hold around Angel's waist. As the bike raced down the bullet car tube at increasingly break-neck speeds, Mal closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed like he'd never prayed before. Not that he'd live, but that the shadow he'd spotted tailing him and Angel since they'd left the wardroom wouldn't report back to Gideon about this. [Fat chance of that happening, Mall!]

Mal then prayed for death. Death would be far kinder than the revenge Gideon would take for this, of that he was certain. [This is what happens when you can't say no to an Angel!]

Mal watched Angel as she stood a couple of feet away from where he still sat on the bike. She was glowing, and he couldn't recall ever having met a woman as beautiful as she looked right at that moment. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

She caught him watching and moved toward him. "Wasn't that just incredible?" She laughed and did a little spin. "I've been waiting a long time to take a ride on that bike. It was amazing, don't you agree, Mal?"



Her excitement was contagious and he laughed, "I actually can't remember when I last had that much fun. Thank you, Angel" he said, gratefully. And he meant it.

"You're welcome," she responded huskily.

Mal looked up at her, immediately noticing a change in her mood.

"So, it's been a while since you had that kind of fun, is it Captain?" asked Angel, moving to stand so close to him where he sat on the bike, that her legs brushed up against his knee.

"Yeah, it's been awhile," admitted Mal. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. [My right hand and dick, however, are intimately acquainted.] He kept that thought to himself and smiled at Angel.

"And what about this kind of fun, Captain?" She moved both her hands to cup either side of his face. "How long has it been since you've had this?" Before he could answer, her mouth fell onto his. Her tongue gently probed against his lips, and as if of their own free will, Mal's lips parted to allow Angel's tongue access to his mouth.

[She tastes like honey,] thought Mal in amazement, as the kiss got more passionate and more intense. Finally, it was only the need for air that caused him to gently push Angel away.

But Angel wasn't having any of that. She reached out a hand to stroke his face, "Why should our fun stop at a bike ride and a kiss? I know we both want more."

Mal wasn't able to respond as Angel's mouth descended on his again. As her tongue plunged into his mouth, he felt her hand rest lightly on his crotch. He moaned in pleasure as Angel began caressing him. He moved a hand up between her slightly parted legs, stroking the soft flesh of her inner thigh as they continued kissing. Mal felt her shift slightly to part her legs even further. She broke the kiss just long enough to whisper feverishly "Higher, please."

Once more Angel's lips fastened on his. Her fingers gently kneaded his cock and balls through the fabric of his pants. He complied with her request and moved his hand up higher until he came into contact with her center. Somehow it didn't surprise Mal that she wasn't wearing any underwear, or that she was wet with arousal. The realization that she'd been naked underneath her dress all this time sent another surge of blood to his cock, hardening him even further. He should have realized that he hadn't felt any panty lines when he'd been fondling her ass while they danced.

Suddenly, something hit Mal. He remembered they weren't completely alone. Hidden out of sight, eyes were

watching every move they made. As much as he wanted this to continue, he knew they shouldn't. Gently but firmly he broke the kiss and pushed Angel away.

"Angel, we shouldn't," explained Mal regretfully, as Angel looked at him questioningly.

"Why not?" asked Angel, reaching out a hand towards his face, "We both want this--don't we?"

Mal caught her hand and kissed it. "Oh, I want this, believe me, I want this." He looked down to the bulge in his pants and Angel laughed softly as her eyes followed his.

"Then what's stopping you, Mal? I can see you want me," said Angel seductively.

"I want you, Angel. God knows I want you. But we shouldn't...not here," said Mal, reluctantly, silently cursing Gideon for having sent a watchdog after them.

Angel's lips turned into a pout and a frown creased her brow as she asked, "And why not?"

While Angel looked at him expectantly Mal tried to figure out how he could answer her question. How could he tell her that there was a Marine watching them? Should he tell her? Something cautioned him not to. He didn't know what it was, but he had the feeling that if she were to know that her brother-in-law had sent a spy after them, it would cause a whole heap of trouble. [Great, so what the hell do I tell her?]

"See? You don't have a good reason," stated Angel, smiling as she extracted her hand from his and began to fondle him again. "Now come on, Mal, I want you. This will be fun and I'm certain it will be a ride neither of us will ever forget."

The look on her face stopped Mal from protesting, and when her mouth came down on his again he knew he couldn't stop himself. He just hoped that the Marine would have the decency to not watch him and Angel. And he further hoped that she'd never tell Gideon about this, and that Angel never found out about their audience. He doubted he'd come out with his balls still intact for not having warned her.

"Oh God," cried Mal, all his thoughts driven away as he felt Angel slide her hands inside his now unzipped pants. The warm soft flesh of her palm felt as it if were searing into his sensitive cock as she took hold of it and began stroking up and down its hard length.

Mal could no longer think about anything else other than the woman before him, what she was doing to him and what he wanted to do to her.

Angel sat facing Mal on the bike, both naked as the day they were born. With Mal's feet flat on the ground on either side of the bike, and the stand kicked down to keep it upright, Angel was sure there was enough support to prevent it from toppling over. Her breathing came out in little pants and moans as Mal gently and expertly rubbed and stroked her clit, causing it to harden at his touch in almost painful arousal.

Leaning forward, Mal captured her mouth. He gently pulled on her lower lip, nibbling on it before slipping his tongue inside her mouth. His free hand cupped the back of her head, pulling her head closer as he deepened the kiss, silencing a sigh of pleasure as he continued the exquisite motion of his finger on her clit and along her damp outer folds.

The intense pleasure her body was feeling mixed with the heady sensation she'd had since dinner and the adrenaline rush from the bike ride. She felt intoxicated and dizzy and more alive than she'd felt in a long time. The feeling continued even when he stopped fingering her clit and broke their kiss.

Reaching out, Angel traced the contour of his lips. [I was right. It's a very kissable mouth.] Watching him closely, Angel wondered what else that mouth could do. She could feel a fresh flow of juices between her legs at what she imagined. [Later, I'll find out what else that mouth can do, later.] First, she had this moment to enjoy.

Lowering her hand between them, Angel took hold of Mal's erect cock and slowly began to stimulate him further with gentle, firm stokes up and down his shaft, before moving down to massage his balls. She watched Mal's eyes close and his mouth fall open slightly. She smiled, squeezed his balls then moved her hand back up his hard length, purposefully letting her nails rake the back of his cock, causing him to gasp and his eyes to fly open.

"My God!"

Angel laughed softly, leaned forward and kissed the area where his collarbone and neck met. She didn't stop the motion of her hand up and down his cock. She felt Mal's hand entwine in her hair and she didn't resist as he gently pulled her head up.

"You have any idea what you're doing to me, girl?" asked Mal gruffly.

"I'm just preparing you, Cowboy," grinned Angel.

An eyebrow shot up. "Oh? For what?"

Angel knew he knew 'for what' but she answered nonetheless, "For the kind of ride you won't forget for a good long while." She gave him a seductive smile. Then with one final stroke of her hand, she withdrew her hand and stood.

She stood with her legs either side of the bike, directly above his erection. Placing her hands on his shoulders she smiled down at him. Then she felt Mal's hands on either side of her hips, his thumb caressing her small unicorn tattoo. He looked up at her, his blue-grey eyes darkened by desire. "Be gentle with me and don't ride me too hard. Don't want me saddle sore in the morning," he teased.

"Oh don't worry, I'll be gentle," responded Angel, seductively.

Slowly, with Mal helping to guide her, she lowered herself onto his cock. Her tight walls gave way to the invasion, until finally she was completely impaled on his hard shaft. For a while they just remained there, letting themselves enjoy the feel of him buried deep inside her.

Then Angel began to move in slow up and down movements, every now and then rotating her hips so that each downward thrust was different from the last. They kept up the slow, gentle pace for some time, with Mal lifting his hips to match her movements.

Tightening her grip on Mal's shoulders, Angel arched her back and drove herself down, taking his cock deeper inside her. She felt Mal's arms close around her waist, drawing her closer to him so that he could take one of her hard, sensitive nipples in his mouth. Angel moaned in pleasure as he licked and sucked the

hard nub.

Dizzy waves of pleasure washed over Angel, edging her closer to climax. Desperately wanting to be carried away by release, she picked up the pace, thrusting downwards harder and faster. Mal released her nipple and followed her lead, matching her pace with his own upward thrusts until finally release came for them both.

The orgasm started from Angel's center and raced through her entire body with such intensity she cried out. The sound of Mal's own loud moan followed, as the walls of her vagina tightened and squeezed his cock, causing his hot seed to be released deep inside her as he came.

Angel collapsed against Mal and his arms held her against his chest, her head resting on his shoulder. Both of them were shaking and breathing heavily, their bodies covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

They remained like that, just holding each other until their bodies calmed. Unable to move on trembling legs, Angel remained astride Mal, his now limp cock still inside her.

Finally, as they both descended from the dizzy heights to which their climaxes had taken their bodies, Angel, with Mal's help, moved off him and she sat facing him again. Mal reached out and gently wiped away a few strands of hair that had stuck to her damp cheek.

"Well, that was some ride you took me on, girl," said Mal, smiling at her tenderly.

[He has a gorgeous smile,] thought Angel, her stomach fluttering. Taking in a deep breath, she told herself she couldn't keep this one. Not letting that get her down, she smiled at him mischievously, moving her hands to cover her breasts, "Which ride would you be referring to exactly? I do believe we indulged in more than one, both totally different, of course."



Mal chuckled and leaned forward to give her a quick kiss before answering, "Both actually. Although I'll admit the last one was especially incredible, amazing, mind blowing and a better ride than the first one."

Angel laughed and felt herself flush with pleasure. "I told you it would be fun, didn't I?" she said, stroking his chest.

"Fun doesn't even begin to cover it." Mal leaned forward again and kissed her. When he broke away, he smiled. "You're incredible, amazing, mind blowing and beautiful."

This time Angel felt the flush bloom into a full out blush and she pushed him away playfully. "Stop it, you're making me blush!"

"That particular shade of red looks good on you," said Mal, winking at her, making his incredibly long, thick eyelashes flutter.

"Flirt!"

"That comes as a surprise?" quipped Mal with a grin.

"Not really," laughed Angel, then she went on quickly, "You know we can have a lot more fun, if you're willing?" She gave a wicked grin and continued, "And able."

For a moment it appeared as if Mal was distracted by something behind her, Angel wanted to turn to see what he was looking at but his voice stopped her.

"Really? Do you think I may not be up to the job?" questioned Mal, his voice teasing.

"The night is still young and you don't have to leave until the morning, right?"

Mal nodded then asked curiously, "What's that pretty head of yours got in mind, girl?"

Angel giggled and gave him a quick kiss before standing and moving away from the bike to retrieve her dress. "We can go back to my quarters and have some more fun. I got to ride the cowboy, now how does the cowboy feel about riding the filly?"

Mal hesitated and again Angel saw him look past her. She turned to see what he might be looking at. When she saw nothing, she decided she was imagining things. She turned back to find Mal standing, hands on hips and a smile on his face. "Ain't you had enough yet?"

Angel let her eyes wander up and down his naked body before her eyes reached his face, "Never! So, what do you say, Mal?" she asked suggestively.

Mal snorted. "I say, 'saddle up your horses, we've got a trail to blaze'."

"Yee-hah," cried Angel.

They both burst out laughing and grabbed for their clothes. They dressed quickly then hand in hand they left the bullet car tube and headed for her quarters.

The instant they reached her quarters they hastily began undressing each other, leaving an untidy trail of discarded clothes as they headed for the bedroom.

They made love again, this time taking the time to tease, arouse and explore each others' bodies thoroughly before Mal laid Angel on her back and gently entered her.

The pace was slow and unrushed. Mal was a gentle, giving lover, taking the time to pleasure Angel with every move he made, until finally, with one slow thrust inside her, he drove them over the edge and they climaxed for the second time that night.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms, like two spoons. Angel savored the feeling of sharing her bed with another person and fell asleep feeling satisfied and happy.

Gideon strode onto the bridge at 07:00 sharp, whistling quietly to himself. Christina Jackson turned and smiled as she saw him, obviously wondering what had put him in such a good mood. When she'd last seen him, he'd been leaving the wardroom with Deborah, and the atmosphere between them could have

been cut with a knife.

They'd continued their argument when they'd got back to their quarters, free to give full rein to their tempers, as Marcus was staying overnight with his cousins.

Gideon smiled as he thought to himself that he really should know better by now. There was only one subject guaranteed to make Deborah go up like a sky-rocket, and that was Angel. He'd launched a vitriolic attack on his sister-in-law's stupidity, and of course Deborah had come out of her corner like a prize-fighter when the bell rang, defending her sister. No one else was allowed to tear strips off Angel; Deborah reserved that pleasure for herself.

It had ended with Deborah storming off into the bedroom, while Gideon had tried to make himself comfortable on the sofa. After an hour of tossing and turning on a couch that was just a little too short to be comfortable, Gideon had given up, vowing to get a new couch, as he was damned if he'd let his wife win another argument just because of an uncomfortable sofa. He'd decided that Deborah would just have to put up with his presence in their bed. He'd turned the living room light on low, then walked into the bedroom. There had been just sufficient illumination to see that Deborah had curled up on the far side of the bed and pulled the covers over her head.

Gideon had undressed quickly, then slipped into the bed as quietly as he could, unwilling to disturb his wife. After a few seconds, Deborah had uncurled herself, turned over and whispered, "I'm sorry."

The Captain had reached out his arm and pulled her to his side, whispering, "Me too. I love you." He'd kissed her forehead and had fallen asleep in seconds.

He'd been awakened by the touch of Deborah's fingers, gently massaging his balls, encouraging his usual early morning arousal. They had made love, then lay quietly, talking. Deborah had told him what she'd been able to find out the previous night.

"Fillion is OK. He's hiding something, and there are some curious gaps in his life-story, but he's basically a good man. He reminds me of you, actually. A bit of a rogue, but underneath, he's kind, and brave and good."

Gideon remembered his wife's words, admitting to himself that it made him feel ten meters tall that she thought of him in that way. He laughed softly at his own contentment as he settled himself in his chair on the bridge, and pulled John's overnight activity report up onto his console.

The Captain's only doubt was that his wife had allowed herself to be too influenced by Fillion's similarities to her husband. Gideon was well aware of his own shortcomings, and how easy it might have been for him to follow another, darker road. He wondered whether Fillion had gone down that road.

Shrugging off his current inability to answer that question, Gideon turned his thoughts to the rest of his early morning discussion with his wife. Deborah had gone on to tell him about the other members of the Lion's crew.

"Teri Stewart is exactly what she appears to be. Friendly, competent and totally loyal to Fillion. I thought at first she might have a bit of a crush on him, but then I sensed how she felt when she looked at Christina, and I realized her interests lie elsewhere."

That in itself was interesting. What was Stewart doing on a male dominated ship if she preferred

women? It was a mystery that Gideon decided to shelve for the moment, but that didn't mean he'd willingly let it go unanswered



"Gagarin is a sweetheart. He's like a puppy dog, anxious to please, and just wanting to be liked. He's the one with the crush on Fillion, but Mal doesn't know it."

That had made Gideon laugh, until Deborah had punched his arm lightly and asked if he could guess how many men on the Excalibur had a crush on *him*. That had sobered Gideon quickly.

He had nothing against male on male sex, and had tried it a couple of times earlier in his life, but he'd long ago come to the conclusion that females were his passion. The idea that some of his male crewmembers might be following him down the hallways, lusting after his butt, was slightly disconcerting. The fact that his wife would know exactly *which* crewmembers was even more uncomfortable, especially after she'd gone on to say, *"And those crewmembers who aren't dying to bonk you have a seriously bad case of hero-worship."* Gideon had quickly changed the subject, although he could feel himself blushing at the memory of the exchange. He'd then asked Deborah about Scott Atkins, and he'd been surprised by the violence of her response.

"He's a snake. No, that's unfair to snakes. He's an odious, filthy-minded lecher, who wouldn't know the truth if it bit him on the nose. There wasn't a thing he said all night that wasn't a lie. And he'd better learn to keep his hands to himself or he may end up losing them. I can only hope he jerks off with his right hand. After the way I crushed it, it's probably too sore and swollen for him to use."

Gideon had laughed and asked her why she was so sure Atkins jerked off.

"Because he's a wanker! He's just damned lucky Lily wasn't there last night. If he'd tried it on with her, she'd have used her dagger to deprive him of a couple of objects near and dear to him, and the twins would have had a new set of balls to play with today!"

Gideon had roared with laughter, but his merriment was cut short when Deborah had told him about what Atkins had tried to do. He'd decided that the Lion's First Officer could well end up having an accident with an airlock on his way out of the Excalibur.

The Captain had then reluctantly left Deborah's bed and got himself ready for work, while his wife had assembled a quick breakfast for them both, and told him she'd collect Marcus from Lily's later.

Gideon finished John's activity report--which could have been summed up in just two words. 'Nothing happened'--just as Christina Jackson turned and said, "Captain Fillion is calling from the Lion, Sir. He'd like to speak to you, if you have a minute."

Gideon nodded and stood. "Put him through to the conference room. How long until we reach Aris?"

Lieutenant Jackson paused, turned and checked the Helm position, then said briskly, "Forty-seven minutes and thirty-five seconds, Captain."

Gideon shook his head and smiled. "You're learning bad habits from Commander Matheson, Lieutenant.

Next time I'll expect it down to the nearest nanosecond."

The sound of Christina's laugh followed him through the doors into the conference room, and was cut off as the doors closed behind him.

Mal Fillion watched as the viewscreen cleared and the Captain of the Excalibur appeared in front of him. He hadn't yet decided whether he really liked this man, but he'd certainly gained some respect for Gideon during the time he'd spent on the Excalibur.

Angel had never noticed that she and Fillion had been tailed by No'Kar when they'd left the wardroom. The Marine had kept at a discrete distance, out of sight, but Fillion had no doubt that if he'd have tried to harm Angel in any way—not that he'd wanted to—the Narn would have torn him to shreds before he could have lifted a finger.

Fillion wondered whether the Marine would have since given her Captain a full report, or would that have been an invasion of Angel's privacy? He could only hope that Gideon's orders had been limited to ensuring Angel was safe, and that his 'guest' didn't wander into any sensitive areas of the ship. Somehow, Fillion thought that Gideon might just have classed Angel's bed as one of those 'sensitive' areas. Fillion had an uncomfortable feeling from the way Gideon had watched Angel dancing that the Captain's feelings toward his sister-in-law weren't entirely fraternal.

Gideon's expression showed nothing but polite enquiry as he looked at Fillion out of the viewscreen. Fillion cleared his throat and spoke quickly. "I just wanted to thank you for the work your crew have done on my ship, Captain. Teri tells me that she couldn't have done better herself, even if she'd had the parts, which she didn't. She tells me it's the best piece of engineering work she's seen in a long time."

Gideon gave a lazy smile as he said, "You're welcome. We have only the best on the Excalibur, Captain. I guess you've seen that for yourself."

Fillion froze, wondering exactly what Gideon meant. Could he be referring to Angel? She was certainly the best thing Fillion had come across in many a long year. He covered his uncertainty with a smile of his own as he replied, "That was definitely the best party I've been to in a long time, with the best food, the best wine and the most beautiful women. Thank you for your hospitality, Captain." He wondered whether it was his imagination, but just for a moment he could have sworn that Gideon's smile flickered.

Hurrying on, Fillion said, "As well as thanking you, I wanted to ask when we'd be arriving at Aris."

"Forty-five minutes. Approximately." For some reason that made Gideon smile again, but he went on, "We'll be dropping out of hyperspace close to the Jumpgate. Should we drop you off there?"

Fillion shook his head and smiled ingratiatingly. "I was wondering if we could hitch a ride to the planet itself. The journey will be much quicker if we stay with you until we get there."

Gideon raised an eyebrow in query, so Fillion went on to explain. "Your people were kind enough to send a message to my buyer about the delay, and he sent a reply that he's happy to wait an extra couple of days if the quality of the goods is all I've said it is." Which it was. Fillion only carried first class cargo. He had a reputation to maintain. In a variety of circles. He went on, "So I thought I may as well drop down to the Aris colony and see if there's any trade to be had." He had another reason for his visit, but Gideon didn't need to know about that.

The Captain of the Excalibur sat silently for a few moments, before he shook his head and said, "I doubt if the colonists have much to trade at present, Fillion. Haven't you heard? They've been hit by Raiders several times recently. That's why we're going there."

Fillion knew all about the Raiders. They were the main reason he'd chosen the route he had, to take him past Aris on his way to Minbar. He smiled back at Gideon. "Yes, I'd heard, but as we're so close, I'm willing to take the chance. It will only take a few hours to check out what the colonists have left and to see if we have anything they need. My buyer on Minbar will wait that long."

Gideon shrugged. "Fine by me. You're making my flight deck look untidy, but I guess I can handle that a little longer. We'll let you know when we arrive in orbit over Aris." The viewscreen cut off abruptly, and Fillion sat back in his seat, thinking about the conversation he'd just had. Why did he get the feeling he'd just done exactly what Gideon wanted him to? The sound of the doors to the Lion's tiny bridge opening attracted Fillion's attention, and he smiled as Teri dropped into the seat next to him.

"We're on our way to Aris."

{Chapter 1} {Chapter 2}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four N

{Part 1: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardroom} {Part 2: Discovery}