

# *The Witches of Eriadne:*

## *Interlude Four P - Part 1: The Centauri Trial*

by *The Space Witches*



*Tuzanor - the City of Sorrows on Minbar.*

### *Chapter 1*

September 2272

#### The Summons

*Gideon sat astride his wife's hips as she lay face down on their bed. He was slowly massaging her back and shoulders, working his way down to her waist, occasionally interrupting his kneading of her back with soft strokes and caresses. Deborah claimed that he still owed her a lot of back rubs from when she'd been pregnant and he hadn't been there to massage her aching spine. As far as Gideon could tell, she was charging compound interest on the debt, but he was happy to pay it. The little whimpers of pleasure he could hear showed how much his wife was appreciating this attention, and helped drive his own arousal.*

*The Captain was lazily contemplating exactly how and in what position he planned to take his wife, when his commlink beeped. Deborah's next whimper was one of disappointment, and as he leaned across to the bedside table, she whispered, "After you've taken that, you'd better damn well finish what you started."*

*Gideon chuckled and lifted the commlink to his mouth. "Yes."*

*Lieutenant Jackson's voice emerged. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Captain, but there's a call for you." Before Gideon could tell her what to do with the call, she hurried on. "It's from President Sheridan's office. They have him on the Gold channel for you."*

*Gideon sighed. "Give me thirty seconds then put it through to my quarters." He cut the connection then leaned forward to kiss Deborah's shoulder. "Don't go anywhere. Normal service will be resumed as soon as*

*possible."*

*He lifted himself reluctantly from the bed, pulled on a pair of pants and T-shirt, and left the bedroom, hearing Deborah's muttered words as he went. "If you don't hurry back, I'll go find someone else to service me." Gideon laughed at her empty threat.*

*Arriving in his old quarters through the connecting door, he sat at his desk, [No need to show the President that the main gun is on line,] and asked the computer to put through the call.*

*Sheridan's face appeared on the viewscreen, and Gideon immediately noticed how rapidly the ISA President was aging. In the nearly eleven years that he'd led the Inter Stellar Alliance, his appearance had aged twenty. Gideon wondered whether the weight of responsibility the office carried had aged the man prematurely, or if it had something to do with Sheridan's 'death' and revival a year before his appointment as ISA President.*

*"Mr. President." Gideon made as if to stand, but much to his relief, Sheridan waved him down again.*

*"Sit. I'm sorry to call you so late at night by your time, but this is the only chance I've had to speak to you personally, Captain Gideon." The Captain couldn't help but feel a small thrill that Sheridan bothered to call him at all, regardless of the time of day. This was his hero, the man whose career Gideon had watched with admiration and respect. Being chosen by him to lead the search for a cure to the Drakh plague, and to Captain the Excalibur, had been the greatest honor of Gideon's career. Sheridan continued, "I hope I didn't interrupt your time with your family."*

*Gideon smiled, thinking of what Sheridan had interrupted and how he planned to resume that activity after the call. His cock twitched in response, and he hurriedly assured the President, "Nothing that can't wait. What can I do for you, Mr. President?"*

*When he returned to his wife, Gideon found that she was still lying face down, and as far as he could tell, hadn't moved since he left. He took a moment to appreciate the sight of Deborah's naked back and buttocks, and her long legs, slightly parted, almost begging for the touch of his hands between them. Just the sight of her was enough to revive his cock, relaxed after his discussion with Sheridan.*

*Gideon stripped quickly and resumed his position astride his wife's hips, leaning forward to kiss the nape of her neck and caress her back. He whispered into her ear, "Now exactly what sort of service was madam looking for?" Shifting slightly, so his stiffening shaft was resting between her buttocks, Gideon started to move gently, sliding his cock up and down the cleft in her ass.*

*Deborah moaned softly. "The best service on the whole damned ship, of course. The one only the Captain can provide."*

*Gideon chuckled and sat upright, sliding back down her legs and grabbing a pillow. Slipping it under her stomach, he lifted her ass until she was positioned as he wanted her then shifted her legs apart until he could kneel between them. Gideon moved his hand to start stroking her, hearing her moan as his fingers found her clit, then he pushed a finger inside her, to stimulate her further. By the time he was ready to enter her, Deborah was writhing her hips, her hands gripping the pillows beneath her head, begging, "Don't just play with me, you bastard! Fuck me."*

*The Captain laid himself along his wife's back, whispering, "Yes ma'am," into her ear, as he drove himself*

*deep inside her.*

*Deborah immediately pushed back against him, drawing him deeper into her hot, wet core, pulsing her vagina in time to his thrusts. Their movements became more frantic, thrusting faster and deeper as they both approached climax, then slowing to prolong the pleasure, until neither could hold back and they exploded into orgasm together. Gideon felt her vagina squeeze tight around him, drawing out every drop from his balls as he came deep inside her. Then Deborah's climax hit him, her waves of bliss crashing down on him, as with each thrust he lifted her to a new level of pleasure. The ecstasy went on and on, as each new surge carried them both with it, until eventually, tiring, Gideon collapsed onto Deborah's perspiring back, well aware that his chest was dripping with his own sweat.*

*They lay still for a few moments, both panting for breath as they recovered, then Gideon lifted himself out and away from his wife, falling on his side next to her. Deborah turned her head to look at him and languidly lifted a hand, pushing back the damp curls that were plastered to her flushed face. Gideon could see her eyes were nearly black where her pupils were dilated with passion, as he leaned forward to kiss her gently on the lips. Deborah moved her hand to push back his hair from where his sweat had stuck it to his forehead. She smiled and said softly, "Well, your service is up to its usual high standards, Captain."*

*Gideon chuckled quietly, "Glad to hear that standards are being kept up," and laughed at her muttered comment that they weren't the only things being kept up.*

*Deborah shuffled across the bed, pushing Gideon onto his back so that she could rest her head on his chest and drape her legs over his. He lifted an arm and placed it round her shoulders, pulling her tightly against his side. They lay quietly for a few moments, recovering, enjoying the silence, fending off sleep. Gideon could feel himself drifting when his wife asked quietly, "Can you tell me what the call was about?"*

*The Captain smiled at her phrasing. Deborah was too discrete to ask straight out what the President wanted and she was well aware that he couldn't tell her everything about his work, but she was always curious. He turned his head to kiss the end of her nose as she lifted her face to look at him. "And you tell me I'm nosy. You're worse than I am. Well, this time I *can* tell you. We have orders to report to President Sheridan on Minbar. He has a mission for us, but he wants me to report in person to get details. He also wants me to bring you and Marcus to meet him and his wife, Delenn."*

*Gideon watched, amused, as Deborah's eyes widened in disbelief. "You're going to meet the President of the ISA and the Head of the Rangers, so you'd better wear your best dress, and wash your hands and face for once. We can't have them seeing what a dirty woman I married."*

*Deborah's response was everything Gideon had expected as she pounced on him, rolled him onto his back to sit astride him, and lowered her head to bite his nipple. He yelped and grabbed her hair, pulling back gently until she looked up at him, grinning.*

*"I'll show you just how dirty I can get, shall I?" Deborah said, as she lowered her head again and started to kiss her way down his chest and stomach, until her lips found his cock. Gideon groaned softly as she took him deep into her mouth.*

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*Demon stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom, inspecting the image there. Her hair was tightly braided back off her face, controlling the usually chaotic fall of blonde curls. Her face was expressionless, not giving any signs of the tension and nervousness she felt. Demon knew how important this meeting with Sheridan and Delenn was to her husband, and she didn't want to do anything that*

*might spoil it for him, but deep down she was terrified. She wondered how in hell a 20th century girl from England had ended up being introduced to the President of the InterStellar Alliance. Demon's mouth twitched slightly, as she inwardly compared the meeting ahead with the presentation of a debutante to the English court in the 19th and 20th centuries. At least she didn't have to wear a ball gown, and no one would expect her to curtsy. [Pity. Lily and I are probably the only women in the ISA who still know how to do that.]*

*Demon looked down at the clothes she'd chosen to wear and hoped that Matthew would approve. He had offered to get Marcus ready while she dressed, and she could hear the two of them arguing in the other bedroom. It sounded as if Marcus was getting stubborn about taking Half-Ted with him. Demon smiled inwardly, her frozen face not shifting. There was no doubt about how that battle would end. The President was going to have to put up with meeting a one eyed, one eared, very battered teddy bear.*

*Turning to check that her rear view was tidy, Demon again wondered about the acceptability of her attire. She had chosen a severe black pantsuit, straight leg pants over low-heeled boots, a tight fitting black T-shirt and a mid-thigh length, mandarin collared jacket, which went some way to concealing her shapely figure. This was *not* the occasion for one of her more revealing outfits.*

*Demon turned as Matthew entered the room, carrying Marcus, who as she expected had Half-Ted clutched firmly in his right hand. At least he wasn't sucking on the bear's sole remaining ear. [Not yet anyway.] Matthew smiled at her--the smile that even after nearly three years of marriage still made her knees tremble--and reached out his hand.*

*"Well, you scrubbed up quite respectably. I hardly recognize you with a clean face."*

*Demon moved herself to let him put his free arm around her and kissed his cheek. "I even washed behind my ears. Want to check?" She turned her head away from her husband and felt him kiss her ear, then heard him sniff.*

*"You smell good, too." Matthew smiled as Demon turned back to kiss his cheek again, then he frowned at her. "Are you all right? You've got that frozen faced, 'I'm in total control of myself' look."*

*Demon tried to smile but knew that it was a feeble attempt. "Just a bit nervous. I don't want to let you down."*

*The Captain looked at her carefully, and shook his head. "Impossible. Just promise me that you won't put your feet on the furniture or spit on the floor and you'll be fine."*

*Demon managed a wobbly laugh as they left their quarters and headed for the landing bay.*

*Gideon stood on the balcony outside the Sheridans' quarters, looking out over the spectacular views of the Minbari city of Tuzanor. The crystal spires and cascading waterfalls were stunning, and Gideon wondered how the Minbari managed to combine beauty and functionality so effectively. This was something that Earth still struggled with, and many cities there were still trying to repair the damage done by rioters and extremist groups during the Plague Years. Earth's economy had recovered well in the three years since the Excalibur had brought back the final part of the cure, but credits were still scarce enough that function came before form.*



*The Minbari, however, seemed to have managed to restore this city to its previous level of beauty, even after their own troubles a few years before, which had left many parts of it in ruins.*

*Gideon turned to Sheridan who stood silently beside him, both men enjoying the warmth of the sun, the breeze that wafted across their faces, and the gentle thundering of the distant cascades of water. "Do you ever get used to this? Or even after all this time living here, does it still look as good to you as it does to me?"*

*Sheridan smiled. "Every time I step out on this balcony, it astounds me. I don't think I'll ever be able to take it for granted. This place is just so damned beautiful that it constantly takes you by surprise." He turned and waved the Captain toward a bench on one side of the balcony. As they sat he continued to speak. "I wanted to talk to you in person about your next mission, and I wanted to meet your wife. I'd better tell you why."*

*Sheridan paused and looked closely at Gideon. "What I want you to do could be extremely dangerous. I'll be sending you into territory where you could get killed and your ship could be destroyed. When I agreed that you and your senior officers could take family with you on the Excalibur, I hadn't envisaged the need to send you into this level of danger. You might want to think about leaving your families behind, here on Minbar. Delenn and I will make sure that they're looked after and kept safe." Sheridan smiled before he continued. "The trouble is, having met your wife and from what I've heard about her, I can't see any way that she's going to agree to be left behind."*

*Gideon nodded. "She can be a little stubborn at times." He knew damned well that Deborah would never agree to be left behind, no matter how dangerous the mission.*

*Sheridan snorted. "Stubborn? From what I hear, she and Delenn are two of a kind. Strong minded, intelligent, loyal. Your wife's been very quiet and well behaved around us, but I suspect that she might have some strong views on staying here, while you go off on a mission."*

*"You could say that." Gideon laughed. If the President only knew...*

*"But we seem to share a taste for strong minded, beautiful women, don't we Captain?" Sheridan turned and grinned at Gideon, who felt himself flushing and quickly looked back out at the view. Surely Sheridan didn't mean... but the President continued, "Have you seen or heard from Liz recently? I believe you and she were..." Sheridan paused, searching for the right word, "friendly, at one time."*

*Gideon looked back at the President in surprise. "Liz? She let you call her Liz? I made that mistake once and never repeated it. She bit my--never mind."*

*Sheridan roared with laughter. "I hear that Captain, sorry, General/Elizabeth Lochley is happily married now. To a Phys Ed teacher called Sandra. Apparently the two of them are very happy together." He looked round at Gideon whose jaw was flapping in the breeze. "Close your mouth, Captain. They don't have flies here on Minbar, but they do have some other flying insects that don't taste too good."*

*The Captain closed his mouth, still staring at Sheridan. He eventually found his voice. "Sandra? SANDRA! Was it something I did? Did I turn her off men for life?" Gideon thought back on his brief relationship with Lochley. She'd seemed to enjoy their physical liaisons well enough, but their equal*

*dedication to their careers had ended their affair. Neither of them had been able to make sufficient time for the other, or at least that's what Gideon had thought.*

*Sheridan laughed quietly. "I doubt if it was you, Captain. I was married to her for a while, remember, and I always had my suspicions that she might be bi-sexual. She had a close friend who died when she was young. Somehow when Zoë died, Liz closed down that side of herself. I think she tried to deny it for a long time, and I'm happy for her that at last she's been able to come out. You know how the military is about a hundred years behind in some ways. An officer marrying a same sex partner would still be 'career limiting', even though it's been legal throughout the Earth Alliance for over a hundred years now."*

*Sheridan's voice had quieted and he became more serious as he spoke. "I guess it was only when Liz finally made General that she could afford to thumb her nose at the hierarchy and come out." He turned to smile at Gideon standing beside him. "Anyway, why should it matter to you now? You have a beautiful wife and son."*

*Gideon smiled, pushing memories of Liz Lochley aside, telling himself that he was happy for her. [But 'Sandra'? How in hell did I miss THAT?!] "Yes, I have, and to be honest I'd hate to have to leave them behind. So what's this mission that's so much more dangerous than what we've been doing up to now?"*

*Sheridan's smile faded as he looked closely at the Captain. "I want you to try to bring the Centauri back into the ISA."*

*Demon sat with Deleenn in her living quarters, both watching their men standing on the balcony outside. David Sheridan, a tall, good-looking nine year old, who showed no outward signs of his Minbari genes, had taken Marcus to his room to share his latest games, leaving the two mothers to talk. Demon was clamping down on her nervousness, somewhat in awe of the legend sitting next to her. Deleenn had been kind and courteous, hospitable and not in the least intimidating since their arrival, but even so, Demon felt somewhat out of her depth, meeting a twenty-third century legend. The two women had talked about their children for a while, both soon admitting they didn't find that topic the most exciting one for discussion. They'd moved on to Earth literature, and Demon was impressed by the extent of Deleenn's knowledge.*

*The women had fallen into silence as they watched the men outside, and Demon was suddenly almost overwhelmed by a wave of grief, stronger than anything she'd felt before. She gasped in surprise, unable to control her response to the surge of emotion, and she stared at Deleenn in shock. Demon knew that her face showed clearly what she had picked up and she quickly brought herself under control, but it was too late. Deleenn had seen her own grief mirrored briefly in Demon's face.*

*The older woman bit her lip and dropped her head. "I'm sorry. I had been told that you were an empath. I should not have allowed myself that feeling."*

*Demon's hand reached out to the Minbari, stopping just short of touching her. "I didn't mean to invade your privacy. I try my best to block others' feelings as much as I can, but that was so strong..." The tall blonde stopped, unsure whether to continue.*

*Deleenn looked up at Demon, her eyes filled with tears. "Sometimes when I look at my husband, I cannot help myself remembering that I shall only have him for a short time. We have been married for nearly eleven Earth years, but they have gone so quickly. We only have another nine years left together, and then he will die." Deleenn's head dropped again as she fought to regain her control.*

*Demon was horrified, and it took every bit of control she had to stop herself from projecting that feeling. She couldn't even imagine what it would be like to know that she and Matthew had only a limited time together, to know that after a specific time he would be taken from her. Her heart went out to the Minbari woman sitting next to her, and she allowed a tiny part of that sympathy to escape her control.*

*Deleenn looked up and smiled weakly. "Thank you. I hadn't known that you could project as well as receive. Very few Minbari can do that. Now tell me, how have you managed to avoid coming to the attention of the Senate Committee on Metasensory Abilities? From what I hear of that organization, you would prefer to avoid that happening."*

*Demon allowed Deleenn to steer the conversation away from the sensitive subject of her grief at the prospect of losing her husband, eventually arriving at what life was like living and raising children in a Starship.*

*Deleenn was curious. "Is there nothing you miss? I lived for several years on Babylon 5 but the station was so large that I could often forget that it wasn't a planet. We had open spaces and gardens, the Zocalo, everything one could want. As big as the Excalibur is, there must be things you don't have."*

*Demon smiled. "Most of the time I hardly notice being on a ship, and the advantages of being able to see new places and meet new people far outweigh the inconveniences. But there's one thing I do miss." She sighed sadly, and Deleenn looked at her curiously. "Water. I miss water. I used to swim in the pool on Eriadne ever day--shower in the morning, soak in my tub in the evening--and I never really thought about it. Now I miss it terribly. I *hate* vibe showers!" Demon allowed herself a small smile to take the vehemence from her words, and Deleenn laughed softly.*

*"I was lucky on Babylon 5. All the ambassadorial quarters had real water showers, although immediately after my change into this form, I had no idea what I was supposed to do with this thing called hair, until Susan Ivanova introduced me to shampoo..."*

*Gideon leaned back on the bench and took a deep breath. "That's quite a mission, Mr. President. The Centauri were expelled--withdrew--from the ISA back in late 2262, wasn't it? Ten years ago? From what I've heard, they haven't exactly been on friendly terms with us since then. What makes you think we can bring them back now?"*

*Sheridan sat with his hands clasped between his legs, elbows on his knees, looking out at the view. "Emperor Mollari is someone who I once thought of as a friend. When he took the Centauri out of the ISA, he told me it was just politics, that he needed a gesture to unite his people. He came to see Deleenn and me here on Minbar, and he gave us a gift for our son. He told us then that he may do things that would surprise us, but to always remember that as well as being Emperor, he was also our old friend Londo."*

*The President turned to Gideon and continued. "I've tried to remember that through all the problems we've had with the Centauri since that time. Now he's sent me a message saying that the time has come to rebuild the bridges between us, and it was signed by Londo, not Emperor Mollari with all the fancy titles and seals. He specifically asked that I send you and the Excalibur to negotiate the terms. He's heard about the work you've done bringing new races into the ISA and he thinks if anyone can pull this off, it's you."*

*Gideon watched Sheridan's face as he talked. When the President fell silent, the Captain asked quietly. "So what's the catch? There's *always* a catch."*

*Sheridan turned back to look at the waterfalls and shook his head. "The catch is that this may be a trap."*



*I'm going to have to send you there, knowing that this whole thing may be a charade to get the ISA's top of the line ship and crew in a vulnerable position, and destroy them."*

*Gideon nodded as he, too, looked out at the spectacular view. "That's the risk we run with every mission. That when we get there the people won't like us and will try to kill us. I've learned not to take it personally." The Captain stood and turned to Sheridan. "So when do we start?"*

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*Marcus sat watching David Sheridan playing with his computer games, clutching Half-Ted tightly, sucking on the bear's single ear. The small child was feeling a little unsure; a little scared of these new people and surroundings. He could feel the kindness and goodwill the new people felt toward him, so he'd allowed himself to be led away from his mother, and he'd come to this new friend's room. His experience of other children had been pretty much limited to his cousins until then, so the concept of an older child, who knew more than he did and had new things to show him, was both new and exciting, if a little scary. Marcus was very careful not to project his excitement or his fear.*

*The little boy gently touched his mental link to his mother, and immediately received a wave of love and reassurance. She was still close by, she knew where he was, and if he needed her, she would come immediately.*

*David had games to play and things to show Marcus that were entirely new to him, and the older child was patiently trying to draw the toddler out, gradually getting him to relax and participate in the simple computer game on the console. Carefully placing Half-Ted by the side of the control panel, well within reach and where he could see the bear, Marcus started to join in the game and was soon laughing merrily at the antics of the characters on the screen. The game was called "Rangers" and it showed men and women called by that name, who went out into space, acting as guardians of peace and defending the Alliance. It was a very exciting game, and Marcus decided that he would ask his father to get a copy for him, but what really intrigued him were the Rangers.*

*When they had finished another game, Marcus looked up at David, his large, hazel eyes opened wide. "Are Rangers really like that? Sometimes they visit our ship and they never do those things."*

*Marcus remembered times when the Ranger Trulann had joined him and his parents in their quarters for dinner. The Minbari had always made Marcus feel uncomfortable, and although the boy had tried to eat quietly and tidily when the Ranger was there, somehow it had always gone wrong, and he'd ended up with half his dinner in his hair and on his clothes. Marcus was never quite sure how that happened. Then the child remembered another Ranger he'd met a few months before, a Ranger whose name was the same as his. That Ranger had seemed much more like the ones shown in David's game.*

*David laughed kindly. "They only fight when they have to. Otherwise they explore space and look after people, acting as messengers and guardians. I'm going to be a Ranger when I grow up." The last words were spoken with a conviction and pride that had a profound impact on Marcus. Until then, he'd always wanted to be a Starship Captain like his father, but at that moment he changed his mind. He decided that he, too, wanted to be a Ranger when he grew up, but he also decided that he'd wait a little while before he told his father.*

*Sheridan and Gideon returned from the balcony to find the living room empty. The President smiled saying, "No doubt they'll come back when they're ready. In the meantime, can I offer you coffee? We don't have anything stronger I'm afraid. Alcohol has such a bad effect on the Minbari that we don't keep any here."*



*Thinking that Sheridan's comment didn't quite tally with the information Captain Fillion had given him a couple of months before, Gideon nodded his acceptance. "If it's real coffee, I'll accept with pleasure. The stuff we get on board is pretty good, but it's not the real thing."*

*Sheridan was pouring two cups from a flask when Delenn and Deborah entered the room. Gideon was relieved to see that his wife's face had relaxed from the previous expressionless mask, and she now wore a half smile as she approached him. He watched from the corner of one eye as Delenn went to Sheridan, kissed him gently and spoke to him quietly. Gideon decided that if it was good enough for the President, it was good enough for him. He put his arm around Deborah and kissed her cheek, saying softly, "Had a good day? I see you managed to dispose of Marcus. Did you get a good price for him?"*

*Deborah chuckled. "He's with David. They're playing on the computer and far from generating some income, I think that our son is about to demand a whole new set of games to play with. Maybe we'd better sell some more books."*

*Gideon's attention was attracted by Sheridan's quiet cough and he looked round to see that the President was standing with his arm around Delenn, smiling. "Delenn tells me that she's invited the three of you to stay the night. If you'll agree, I'll show you to the guest suite."*

*Gideon looked round at Deborah, his eyebrows raised. She smiled back at him and whispered, "Do you mind? Delenn tells me that they have a *really* big tub in their guest rooms."*

*The Captain turned back to the President, a broad smile on his face. "That would be wonderful, Mr. President. Thank you."*

*Delenn lay with her head on her husband's chest, her arm draped across him. She was always careful how she positioned her head when she did this. In the early days of their marriage, John had sported bruises on his chin on several occasions, where it had come into close and painful contact with her bone crest. It was one of the reasons he had grown a beard. The Minbari woman could feel her husband's hand stroking her hair and yet again she closed her mind to the grief that she carried with her constantly, at the thought that all too soon he would be gone from her bed and her life forever.*

*John kissed the top of her head, and Delenn lifted her face slowly, allowing him plenty of time to move back. He smiled gently down at her and spoke softly. "Well? Is she?"*

*Delenn nodded. "Yes. Exactly as Trulann had told me. Captain Gideon's wife is both a receiving and projecting empath."*

*Sheridan sighed deeply. "From what Gideon told me, she'll insist on going to Centauri with him. I hate this, Delenn. We're sending our best ship and crew into danger on the word of someone who neither of us trust, and we're almost encouraging Gideon to take his family and the family of his First Officer into danger with him, because it suits our purposes. This isn't right. I ought to order him to leave them all behind."*

*Delenn looked up at him and smiled sadly. "We do what we must. We have given the Captain and his wife all the information we have. We have offered her and their son a home here on Minbar. It will now be their decision, but I understand why Demon goes with her husband everywhere she can. The same desire drives me sometimes to neglect my duties as Entil'zha to be with you."*

*Sheridan laughed softly. "You? Neglect your duties? I don't believe it, but let me remind you about the duties required of the President's wife ..."*

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*Gideon lay back against Deborah's shoulder, the hot water covering him to his chin. His wife sat behind him, leaning back against the side of the tub, while he sat between her legs, her arms wrapped around him, her hands resting under his on his stomach. He smiled as he felt her fingers twitch and he tightened his grip.*

*"For once in your life, be patient. Keep your hands just where they are and leave my main gun alone. For the moment, anyway." Gideon felt as much as heard Deborah's chuckle as he lay against her, luxuriating in the heat of the water surrounding him, and the softness of her breasts against his back. Then he felt her move her legs to wrap around him, hooking her ankles over his knees, enveloping him completely. [Bliss.]*

*Deborah kissed his ear and whispered, "Comfortable?"*

*Gideon let out a small groan of contentment. "I think I died and went to heaven. I can't remember the last time we did this. How in hell did you manage to swing it?" He lifted Deborah's hand to his mouth and kissed it.*

*Deborah told him how she and Delenn had discovered a mutual hatred of vibe showers. Gideon laughed quietly as he remembered the invective his wife vented on that piece of equipment. He listened as she went on to tell him how Delenn had offered to arrange for Deborah and Marcus to use an apartment in Tuzanor, while Gideon took the Excalibur to Centauri Prime.*

*"I told her that although the offer was tempting, if I got easy access to a tub every day, I'd turn into a prune and when you came back you wouldn't want me any more."*

*Gideon chuckled. "Damn right. I like your skin just the way it is." He reinforced the point by sliding one of his hands down her thigh under the water. "But seriously, it might be best if you and Marcus stayed here. This mission could be more dangerous than anything we've done before, worse than Stryvstextix." His other hand clasped hers gently where it rested on his stomach.*

*The memories of what had happened on that planet were still painful. Gideon had sometimes wondered if he could have got through it alone, without the love and support Deborah had given him. Gideon hated the thought of leaving her and his son behind, the thought of returning to his quarters after each shift to find them empty, of sleeping alone in an empty bed. He never wanted to do those things again, but even that was preferable to risking their lives.*

*Deborah kissed the top of his head and spoke softly. "All the more reason for me and my sisters to come with you. You might just need us again, and before you say it..." Gideon had opened his mouth to interrupt. He closed it again. "If we do need to use our powers, we'll be more careful and make sure that Angel doesn't overstretch herself. OK?"*

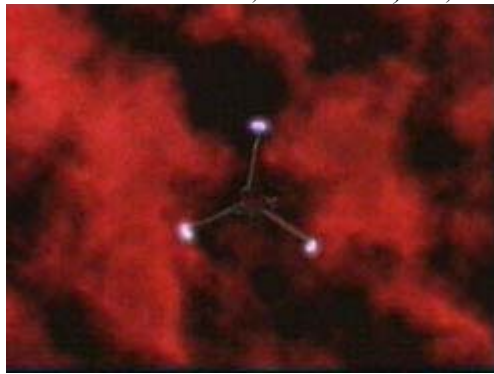
*Gideon lifted her hand and kissed it again. "OK." Lifting himself half out of the water he turned to face her, kneeling between her legs. "Now, is this suite shielded for telepaths?" Deborah nodded. "In that case, Marcus is asleep, no one is expecting us anywhere, my commlink is next door, and we have a tub full of hot water. Any ideas on what you'd like to do next?"*

*Deborah grinned and reached out to pull his head down into a passionate kiss, whispering, "I checked, they even have flat beds for human visitors."*

*Gideon chuckled as he slid his arm around her waist, "Good, because what I have in mind wouldn't be physically possible on one of those Minbari slanty beds."*

### The Brief

*Gideon looked around the conference room at the team he'd assembled there. Commander John Matheson, his XO and friend, Lieutenant Christina Jackson, his second officer, also responsible for navigation and helm, and Dunall, the Minbari who led his Communications team. Ben Healy, Gideon's old Master at Arms, had come out of retirement just for this one last mission, to act as Chief of Security, and Ankaren,*



*the Excalibur's Head of the Sensor team, sat next to him. Luke Raven sat to one side. As Chief of Medicine, he didn't really need to be involved in this briefing. Gideon hoped that Raven and his people would have no role to play in their mission, but he was also aware that bad things often happened--the universe was like that--and he wanted his medical team on alert. The Captain had just finished briefing the team on the mission ahead.*

*"OK, we're now an hour away from the point at which we'll come within range of the Centauri sensor systems. Ten minutes before we reach that point, we send a signal to Minbar. As soon as the President receives our signal, he will send a message to Centauri Prime advising them of our imminent arrival. That message will include half a code. We will send the other half of that code when we are five minutes outside the Centauri sensor range."*

*The Captain turned to Dunall and handed her a data crystal. "This contains the other half of the code. Get it right, or they'll attack as soon as we enter their space." Dunall nodded and clasped the data crystal tightly. Gideon turned back to the group.*

*"We're doing it like this to give the Centauri as little notice of our arrival as we can. We don't want them to have time to prepare a reception for us. While we believe and hope their intentions to be peaceful and honorable, we have to be prepared for this whole thing being a trap. Lieutenant Jackson," The tall, dark woman straightened in her chair, as Gideon turned his attention to her.*

*"You'll be critical to the safety of the ship. Commander Matheson and I will be going down to the planet together, so you'll be in charge." Gideon smiled at the surprise he could see on Jackson's face. The Captain and First Officer never went planet-side together, if there was any risk of hostilities.*

*"Yeah, I know, unheard of, but necessary on this mission. We know that the Centauri have top rated telepaths, and they have no reservations about using them. Their Emperor always used to be surrounded by them at all times, whether they were visible or not. They may have changed that custom in recent years, but then again, they may not. Commander Matheson will accompany me to make sure that if any scans are done, we know about it. A P12 telepath will be able to cut through any blocks the Commander can put up, but at least we'll know they've done it, which will be all we need to know. If that happens, we get the hell out of there."*

*Gideon had been pacing the whole time he'd been giving the briefing. Now he leaned back against the shelf beneath the view screen. "As soon as we cross into Centauri space we go to full battle alert status. We stay on that status until we leave Centauri territory. Under no circumstances is that status to be revoked. I want to make this absolutely clear. You do not stand down for any reason, and that includes a direct order from Commander Matheson or me. If we attempt to give such an order, then you know that we are being controlled by Centauri telepaths and you get the hell out of there, even if that means leaving one or both of us behind. Is that clear?" The Captain stared at each of his senior team, until he got their agreement either through a nod or a verbal acceptance.*

*"OK, we now have..." he checked the clock on the wall of the conference room, "fifty minutes until we hit the Centauri sensors. Any questions?" This time he got a spoken negative from each person seated at the table. "Then go to your stations. We go to battle standby in forty minutes, as soon as we signal Minbar."*

*The group stood and exited through the various doors, leaving Gideon and Matheson behind as the doors closed. The Captain slid into a chair across the table from his XO and poured himself a coffee. They sat in silence for a few moments before Matheson spoke quietly. "They're a good team, Captain. If anyone can make this mission a success, it's the team we've put together here on the Excalibur."*

*Gideon nodded then drank. Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he replied, "I know, and if it were just you, me and the team we've built who were going into this, I wouldn't be concerned, but..." he trailed off.*

*John looked closely at his commanding officer. "But it's our families you worry about."*

*Gideon smiled, for once not making the mistake of saying, 'you read my mind.' He'd fallen into that trap once too often in the past. "Yes. I keep thinking that we should have left them behind. Sheridan and Deleem would have taken care of them. I shouldn't have put them all at risk like this."*

*Matheson smiled gently. "Could you have made Demon stay behind if she hadn't wanted to? Short of physically restraining her, that is? I know that Lily would have clawed her way back on board through a squadron of armed Narn Marines, if I'd tried to leave her behind."*

*Gideon laughed out loud at the thought of the tiny redhead tangling with his crack fighters. Although a betting man, that was one fight he wouldn't have been willing to give odds on.*

*"Don't forget that we left G'Tan and his Narns behind on Minbar. Healy and the human Marines wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with Lily, and if Deborah weighed in as well," he laughed again, "Luke would be busy patching Marines back together for weeks." The Captain sobered quickly. "But maybe we should have left the children behind. They have no place on a ship which may be going into battle."*

*Matheson leaned forward to reinforce his argument, as he shook his head. "That's not possible, and you know it. The children's links with their mothers are now strong enough that it could damage them all if we tried to separate them. Also, having Demon, Angel and Lily on board gives us a secret weapon, one the Centauri know nothing about. Could we really afford to go into this mission without them? The power the three sisters have is..." The XO stopped, at a loss for words.*

*Gideon poured himself another coffee as he thought about what Matheson had said. They'd seen the awesome power of the sisters' merge in the fight over Stryvstextix. When the Vorlon had adapted the sisters to become a weapon in their fight against the Shadows, they had created something stronger than anything the younger races had seen before. Then the Vorlon had lost control of their weapon when the*

women refused to kill for their masters. Unable to force the sisters to destroy their enemies, the Vorlon had placed them in stasis, no doubt intending to go back and try again later. Then the Vorlon and the Shadows had gone beyond the Rim, leaving their weapons, including the sisters, behind them. With one of their number missing, Deborah, Angel and Lily were not as powerful as they would have been, had Ilas been part of their merge, but even limited as they were, they had still managed to take out a full size destroyer using mental power alone.

The memory of that battle, of what his wife and her sisters had done, and what John must have gone through when he was linked to them, still made Gideon shudder when he thought about it.

The Captain looked carefully at his XO and asked, "What was it like, John? You were linked to them while they were merged and fighting, what was it like to be part of that power?"

He watched as the Commander's eyes closed and his face paled. "It was terrible. I really can't describe what it's like to feel yourself dying, over and over again. We felt the deaths of every person on that destroyer, every pain, every fear, every moment of panic." Matheson opened his eyes and looked at Gideon, who remembered that he'd heard that telepaths avoided too many deathbed scans. It was supposed to have a bad effect on them. "I hope to God that they never have to do that again, and if they do, I don't want to be linked with them when they do it. Matthew, I know those feelings drove the sisters to rebel against the Vorlon, but I don't know how they cope with the memories of all those deaths. I was only at the fringes of what they experienced, and I never want to get any closer."

Gideon frowned in concern for the vehemence expressed by the younger man, and spoke softly. "I think it's instinctive. The need to protect the people they love. The Stryvsteptixi threatened the sisters, their children and the people they love. Us. I can't imagine Deborah killing for anything less, but I can see her defending Marcus with her last breath." He smiled gently. "And she'd probably do the same for me, as Lily would for you. As we would for them."

The Captain glanced up at the clock and stood. "Thirty minutes to Centauri sensor range. We'd better get to the Bridge." He started towards the door then stopped and turned to look at Matheson. "We'll do whatever we have to do, to make damned sure that our wives never have to use that power again, but knowing they can do that, does help me sleep more soundly at night."

The two men left for the Bridge.

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### Preliminary Hearing

Gideon held Deborah tightly to him, burying his face in her hair as he kissed her neck and shoulders. She'd joined him in the landing bay to say goodbye, before he boarded the shuttle down to Centauri Prime, and he'd been a little startled by her choice of clothes. It had been a while since she'd worn the black leather, skin-tight pants. The cut-off t-shirt--the one that left her midriff bare and emphasized her breasts--hadn't seen the light of day for some time, either. Gideon wasn't complaining, he just pulled her close and slid his hands over the bare skin of her back, until he could cup the cheeks of her butt and pull his wife tight against his groin.

Deborah kissed his neck and ear, then whispered, "Be careful and come back soon."

Gideon pulled his head back enough to look into her eyes and smiled, "I'm always careful." She lifted one eyebrow in surprise at his comment. "OK, so maybe I'm not, but I'll be careful this time, I promise."

Deborah raised her hand to gently stroke his cheek, and then kissed him softly on the lips. "Please. I have a bad feeling about this mission. Something isn't right. I wish I could go with you."

Gideon kissed her forehead and agreed. "I wish you could, too. I want to get you in front of the Emperor as soon as I can. That way you can tell me if he's lying or whether the Centauri are sincere about coming back into the ISA. But don't worry. John will take care of me on this trip." He nodded across to where his XO was hugging Lily tightly to him, while Luke Raven had his arms around both of his partners.

With one last kiss, Gideon let his wife go and called across to John Matheson and his partners, "OK, put him down, we have to go. Can't keep an Emperor waiting, can we?"

Matheson looked at his CO quizzically. "Are you all right, Captain? You look a little uncomfortable there."

Gideon sighed. "John, I'm so hard it hurts. If I can't get this thing down before we land, Emperor Mollari is going to think that I'm VERY pleased to meet him."

Matheson bit his lip and tried not to smile. Failing miserably, he chuckled, "Demon does look rather... arousing in that outfit." He watched as the Captain swung around to glare at him.

"Arousing? In those pants, she could turn Jell-O into concrete! She certainly made her point." He smiled gently as he shifted in his seat on the shuttle, apparently trying to find a more comfortable position.

Matheson continued to try to keep his face straight, as he asked what that point had been, but was well aware that he wasn't having much success.

Gideon sighed. "She was reminding me what I have waiting for me back home. Just her way of saying that I should be careful to come home in one piece. She can be very effective at non-verbal communication when she chooses, and when she chooses to wear those pants, she certainly gets her message across." The Captain was grinning when he finished, but shifted again, obviously uncomfortable. Just for once, his discomfort was not a direct result of wearing his dress uniform, although John was sure it didn't help. The Captain *hated* that uniform.

The XO pointed to the door at the back of the cabin. "You could always go into the bathroom and... uh... find some relief?"

Gideon's face was a picture of exasperation. "Commander, are you suggesting that I should jerk off before an interview with the Emperor of the Centauri? Before we start on the most important mission we've been given since we were sent out to find the cure for the Drakh plague?"

Matheson did his best to look innocent. "Well, Captain, it could help relax you, unwind you for the job ahead, relieve all those tensions and anxieties..."

Gideon cut him off before he could continue. "Commander?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Shut up."

"Yes, Captain."

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*Riding in the limousine that had been sent to collect them from the shuttle port, Gideon looked out of the windows at the city. There were gaps between buildings where rubble was piled high, other open spaces where vegetation grew unchecked, and the road and sidewalk were pitted with potholes. The whole city had a derelict air to it, a feeling added to by distant columns of smoke, where buildings seemed to burn unchecked. The armored vehicles that escorted them front and back emphasized the sense of being in a post-apocalyptic nightmare, as did the fly bikes that flew overhead, guarding the column of vehicles from aerial attack.*

*Gideon looked across at the Centauri Minister, who had met them at the shuttle port and now rode in the limo with them. "What happened? Why is the city in ruins?"*

*Minister Baronni's face didn't flicker as he said, "The Inter-Stellar Alliance happened, Captain. This is the result of the attack by the fleet sent to crush the Centauri people."*

*Gideon was appalled. "But that was ten years ago! Why hasn't the damage been repaired since? And those fires weren't caused by the ISA attack, they're recent."*

*Baronni sighed. "The attack may have been ten years ago, but it took every credit the Centauri people had to repay the damages assessed on us afterwards by the ISA. Those penalties kept us from even starting to repair the damage caused by the attack for over five years. Since then, any excess credits we have go to build our fleet, to ensure that no one can ever attack us in the heart of our empire again. Some of the population doesn't like paying the taxes this investment requires. They have to be encouraged to pay." The Centauri nodded at the burning building they were passing, where a family stood outside, huddled together under the guns of Centauri guards.*



*Gideon swore softly under his breath. The sight of women and children being harassed by armed soldiers offended him, whatever planet it took place on, and regardless of his ability to do anything about it. He gritted his teeth and looked back at the Minister. "I shouldn't think the ISA is very popular around here."*

*The Centauri bared his teeth. [With those fangs that sure as hell doesn't look like a smile.] Gideon thought, as he watched.*

*"They are not. If it were left to me, your ship would be blown out of our skies and you and your First Officer would be shot as war criminals, an example to the rest of the ISA. But our Emperor does not agree with me, or with most of the Centaurum, so you are here. I suggest that you leave again, quickly." Baronni turned his head away and looked back out of the window at the scenes of devastation they passed on every corner.*

*Gideon sat back in his seat and sighed. This was not a good start to the mission. If the Centaurum were against peace and rejoining the ISA, the Emperor would be hard pressed to implement a peace agreement against their will.*



*He was lost in thought, when the Minister spoke again. "Bringing a telepath with you, to spy on us and pry into our minds, will not improve the Centaurum's attitude, you know."*

*Gideon's hackles rose, as he saw Matheson flush at the insult. "Commander Matheson is my First Officer and he abides by all the regulations laid down by the Senate Committee on Metasensory Abilities. Those regulations do not allow him to carry out scans or read minds in any way, without the consent of the subject. I am deeply offended at your comment and the implication that Commander Matheson or I would behave improperly in any way on a mission of this importance. I will advise Emperor Mollari of my displeasure, and President Sheridan will also hear of how his accredited representatives were insulted. I'm sure neither will be impressed."*

*Baronni blanched at the tone and content of Gideon's words, realizing that he had gone too far. He muttered an apology as Gideon continued, "Commander Matheson would not carry out unauthorized scans under any circumstances, but I have heard that some Centauri telepaths may not be so... discrete. It may be worth passing on to whoever might be interested, that Commander Matheson will instantly detect any attempts to scan us. Any such attempt would, of course, lead to the immediate breakdown of negotiations."*

*The Minister pulled himself up straight in his seat. "I can assure you that no such attempts would be authorized by the Emperor or the Centaurum."*

*Gideon leaned forward and smiled wolfishly, as the limo drew to a halt outside the Emperor's palace. "Then none of us have anything to worry about, do we?"*

*A guard opened the door and Gideon left the vehicle before Baronni had chance to reply.*

*They walked through the billowing, white curtains of the Emperor's palace, escorted by Baronni at their side and four guards behind. [An honor guard. Oh sure,] Gideon thought to himself.*

*They hadn't seen any daylight since entering the palace. Every window they passed was boarded up tight, concealing the view of the burning and devastated city outside. The twists and turns of their route were confusing, and Gideon could never be sure which of the voile curtains covered walls, and which concealed rooms full of people watching them. The whole atmosphere of the palace was claustrophobic, turned inwards, as if reflecting the Centauries' attitude toward the rest of the galaxy these past few years. Gideon wondered if they were really ready to start looking outwards to the other races again, when the heart of the Empire was still turned in on itself.*

*Baronni led them into a spacious room, at the back of which stood a large throne, made of carved wood and red velvet, surrounded by heavy brocade drapes. It seemed they had arrived at their destination but the throne was empty. Where was the Emperor? A young Centauri appeared from between the curtains on one side of the room and rushed up to Baronni, whispering frantically into his ear. For just one moment, Gideon wished that John weren't so ethical. He would have loved to know what was being murmured so desperately to the Centauri Minister.*

*Baronni nodded and shooed the other Centauri away, then turned to Gideon and Matheson. "My sincere apologies, Captain, but it would appear that your journey has been wasted. I'm afraid that our Emperor is indisposed and will be unable to receive visitors today." Gideon didn't know how the Minister could have sounded less sincere, but gritted his teeth and was about to respond politely, when he was interrupted by the sound of tearing cloth.*

*Turning to the source of the noise, Gideon saw a white-gloved hand emerging from between the pale, semi-transparent drapes, grasping the edges and pulling downwards, dragging the material away from the rail. The hand was followed by a body that stumbled into the room, nearly falling, but then recovering enough to sway upright. Every Centauri in the room rushed towards the figure, but they were waved back imperiously by a hand that grasped a bottle firmly around the neck.*

*Gideon took in the white and gold brocade jacket, the intricately embroidered sash and waistcoat, the long, white pants and white silk socks ending at the gold embroidered slippers, and bowed his head respectfully. "Emperor Mollari."*

*The Emperor swayed as he slowly focused on his audience and the two Earthforce officers standing in front of him.*

*"Ah! You must be Captain Gideon. It is so good to see a human face again, you know. It has been too long since we have had human visitors to the palace." Mollari stumbled across the room, still holding his bottle tightly in his right hand, and draped his left arm around the Captain's shoulders, leaning heavily on him for support. Gideon tried hard not to breathe too deeply, as he was sure he could get drunk just on the fumes emerging from the Emperor. Brevari was one of the strongest spirits in the galaxy and Mollari smelled as if he'd taken a bath in the stuff then drank the contents of the tub afterwards.*

*Before Gideon could speak to introduce himself and Matheson, the Emperor continued, "I miss humans. I have always liked humans, you know. I like the men because they don't have proper hair crests, which is only fair because they are so lacking in other... attributes." Mollari sniggered and Gideon sighed. He'd heard about the Centauri 'six' and his only regret about not having them was that they could be a great help in cheating at poker. Deborah was more than happy with his 'one' and that was enough for him.*

*The Emperor leaned even closer and breathed neat Brevari into Gideon's face, making the Captain's eyes water. "I always liked the human men, but I loved your human women. You have the most beautiful women in the galaxy, Captain, do you know that? Do you have beautiful women on board your ship? Will you bring your beautiful human women to see a sad, old Centauri, whose shoes are too tight and who has forgotten how to dance?"*

*Gideon was aware that Baronni and the other Centauri were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation he was having with the Emperor, but there wasn't a lot any of them could do about it, unless they were willing to physically drag Mollari away. The Centauri had gradually leaned increasingly heavily on the Captain, until Gideon was almost holding him up.*

*"Yes, your Majesty. We have beautiful human women on our ship. I'm fortunate enough to be married to one of them, and hope to have the honor of introducing her to you, if that would be acceptable." It was too good a chance to get Deborah and the Emperor together, so she could read his emotions.*

*Mollari sighed deeply, his drunken good humor turning maudlin. "Do you have a picture of your beautiful wife, Captain? You humans are so sentimental, I'm sure you have a picture of her to brighten up my day."*

*Gideon smiled and reached into the inside pocket of his dress uniform, moving slowly so that the Centauri guards could see exactly what he was doing. The last thing he needed was some trigger-happy guard thinking he was going for a concealed weapon. As he pulled his wallet out, he gave silent thanks that he never kept the naughty pictures of Deborah in there. The Emperor might enjoy the pictures of her naked or*

*in her stockings, but Gideon didn't intend sharing them.*

*He opened the wallet and held it in front of Mollari. The picture was a two-dimensional copy of the one Deborah had given him on the Vorlon cube, in which she held a two-day-old Marcus against her shoulder and smiled gently out of the picture. The look of love on her face made this one of Gideon's favorite pictures and he kept a copy with him at all times. The Emperor seemed to have trouble focusing at first, but then peered at the picture, squinting slightly.*

*Gideon watched as a look of sorrow spread across the Centauri's face, and the old man whispered, "She is very beautiful." He lifted a shaking hand to point at the picture and asked, "Is this your child?"*

*The Captain nodded. "Yes, your Majesty. My son: Marcus. This was taken just after he was born, but he's improved with age. He's three and a half Earth years old now, and looks more like his mother every day."*

*Mollari sighed deeply again and leaned harder on Gideon's shoulder. "I had a beautiful wife once, you know. She was a dancer, but my family didn't approve." Gideon was shocked to see tears appear in the old Centauri's eyes. "But I never had a son. I would have liked to have a son."*

*The Emperor was silent for a moment then turned his head to whisper into Gideon's ear, so quietly that the Captain knew no-one else present could possibly have heard. "Do you what I would like now, Captain?" Gideon shook his head. "I would like to die."*

*The Captain looked at Mollari in shock as the old man whispered, "Yes, I want to die. Find my old friend G'Kar for me and send him here. It is the only way. G'Kar must come, so that I can die. Do this for me, Captain. Set me free."*

*Gideon was trying to think of an appropriate answer to this startling request, when the Emperor's face changed. The sorrow faded and was replaced by a cold impassive stare, the same look that Deborah wore when she was controlling herself, locking down on all her emotions, refusing to let herself feel. Gideon watched as that look appeared on Mollari's face and the old man straightened.*

*He took a step backwards from the Captain and gestured for one of his aides to join them, passing over the bottle of Brevari. When the Emperor spoke again, his tone was completely different: emotionless and controlled. "You must forgive me, Captain, I am unwell. Please return to your ship, and we will contact you about a further meeting." With that, Mollari turned toward the other Centauries who quickly surrounded him, sweeping him from the room, leaving Gideon and Matheson alone with Baronni and the four guards.*

*Sitting on the shuttle on their way back to the Excalibur, Gideon turned to Matheson. "Well? What did you make of that? I'm sorry I didn't introduce you, John, but he never gave me the chance."*

*Matheson shrugged. "He was obviously drunk, but whether he knew what he was doing or saying, who knows? What did he whisper to you at the end, before he sobered up?"*

*Gideon sat back in his seat and sighed. "He said he wanted to die. He wanted me to find someone called G'Kar, so that he could die. There was a Narn called G'Kar aboard Babylon 5, when Mollari was ambassador there. He became some sort of spiritual leader, but he disappeared a while back. Maybe Mollari feels the need for some spiritual guidance to 'set him free', but for a Centauri to look for help from*

*a Narn seems damned unlikely."*

*He sat brooding in silence for a while, before speaking again. "He sobered up awfully damned quick, John. I've never seen anyone sober that quickly. He almost looked like a puppet being pulled up by his strings. There's something weird going on here, and we need to find out what it is. Did you pick up anything at all?"*

*Matheson shook his head firmly. "I had my shields up as far and as hard as I could get them, Captain. You know..."*

*Gideon waved him into silence. "Yeah, I know the rules. That's why I want Deborah to meet the Emperor. She doesn't have to follow the rules."*

### *Pre-Trial Motions*

*Gideon sat on the bridge, reviewing the results of the latest drill. Keeping the crew on constant battle alert was taking its toll, and he was running regular drills of every battle scenario he could think of, just to relieve the tension. He would have liked to test the scramble time of the fighter wings, but launching them at this stage could have disastrous results, so they only went as far as getting the pilots into their machines. Every training simulator on the ship was in full use, twenty-four hours a day, as every fighter pilot honed his or her skills. The Captain could see that the wings had set up competitions between themselves to see who could get to their fighters fastest, and who could get the highest score on the simulators.*

*All in all, the crew was on top form and raring to go, despite the stress of their situation, in enemy space, surrounded by ships whose guns were no doubt manned by Centauries with itchy trigger fingers. On occasion, one of the enemy ships would drift a little closer than the limit they had mutually agreed, no doubt testing the alertness of the Excalibur crew. So far, a politely worded rebuke had been sufficient to send such ships back outside the agreed buffer zone. So far.*

*Gideon and Matheson had returned to the ship three hours earlier, and since then had received no contact from the planet below. The Captain wondered how long it would take the Centauri court to recover from the shock of their drunken Emperor's conversation with the Earthforce officers, and just when they would be invited back down again. The soft tone sounding from the comm. unit indicated that he might get his question answered.*

*The Communications Officer turned in her seat and spoke, grinning. "Centauri Prime respectfully requests permission to speak with you, Captain. They're being very polite about it."*

*Gideon smiled. "I bet they are. Put the call through to the Conference room, please. Commander?" He turned to Matheson who was standing at the front of the bridge. "You're with me."*

*"Minister Baronni. A pleasure." Gideon kept his tone dry as the Minister's face appeared on the viewscreen. "I do hope the Emperor has recovered from his... indisposition."*

*Baronni's smile was tight. "Sadly, Emperor Mollari suffers from an allergic response to certain beverages, but he is quite well again now."*

*Gideon kept his face straight, admiring the Centauri's use of a half-truth. [We're all allergic to that much Brevari, Minister, particularly my wife. Most of us would be falling down allergic. Hell, most of us would be dead from alcohol poisoning.]*

*"I'm delighted to hear that. Despite the Emperor's... condition, it was an honor and a privilege to share such an intimate audience with him." Gideon smiled inwardly. That should have the bastards worrying about what Mollari had said to him that they'd been unable to hear. "I do hope that we will be able to resume our discussions in the near future, subject of course to His Majesty's continued good health and avoidance of those beverages that cause such an unfortunate reaction."*

*If Baronni's smile had got any tighter, his lips would have disappeared down his throat. "The Emperor would like to invite you and your First Officer," the Centauri nodded at John as he stood beside Gideon, facing the viewscreen, "to a reception here at the palace this evening. Tomorrow morning, we can start our detailed discussions on the reasons for your visit." A frown of disapproval crossed the Minister's face as he continued, "His Majesty has asked me to remind you of your promise, Captain. He extends his cordial invitation to your wife, for her to join us at the reception. He has also instructed me to ask if your First Officer has a beautiful wife. If so, the Emperor would very much like her to attend, too."*

*Gideon smiled and nodded his head. "You can advise the Emperor that Commander Matheson's wife is very beautiful, Minister, and I know that she would be honored and delighted to be introduced to His Majesty."*

*Suddenly, Baronni lurched to one side, and Mollari replaced him in the center of the screen, having given his Minister a hard shove to get him out of the way.*

*The Emperor beamed at Gideon and seemed to be trying to see beyond him and Matheson, looking for something else on board the Excalibur. Seeing only the closed doors of the Conference room, Mollari's disappointment was evident, as he asked, "And do you have any more beautiful women aboard your ship who you could bring with you?"*

*Gideon's mind raced. He hadn't expected to get this opportunity. "My wife has a beautiful sister, who would also be honored to meet Your Majesty. She works in our Medbay, and I know that our ship's doctor would be happy to escort her to your reception."*



*The Captain wanted to get Raven close to Mollari if he could, to try to work out if there were a medical reason for the Emperor's odd behavior and mood swings. Having the doctor accompany Angel was too good a chance to miss, and having Angel along would also have advantages. With her telekinetic abilities, she was as good as a secret weapon. Gideon might not be able to take a fully charged PPG into the palace, but taking Angel was the next best thing.*

*The Emperor pouted and sighed. "Ah, if that is the price I have to pay for you to bring another lovely lady to grace my court, then bring your ship's doctor if you must, but Captain, I will expect your wife's sister to be very beautiful. I do hope that you will not disappoint me."*

*Gideon smiled. "I think I can be confident that you won't be disappointed, your Majesty, by my wife, her sister or Commander Matheson's wife. We shall all look forward to this evening's reception with great*

*anticipation." He bowed slightly as Mollari signed off and turned to Matheson.*

*The Commander grinned. "Your nose will grow if you keep telling lies like that."*

*Gideon sighed deeply. "Looks like it's time to break out the dress uniforms again, John. I hate those damned things!" He sighed again, and checked the time. 16:00. "You'd better tell Lily to get out her best party dress, and get Luke to brush down his tux. I'll break the news to Deborah and Angel."*

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*The Captain called Angel on his commlink before he left the conference room, and smiled at her excited response. Angel loved any excuse for getting dressed up and partying. Deborah was a rather different matter, so he decided to deliver the news in person. After telling John that he was going off duty, Gideon headed for his quarters*

*He found Deborah working at the desk in his old quarters, dictating a chapter of the book she was writing. Gideon and Raven were still trying to persuade her that what she wrote was good enough to send to a publisher, but for the moment they were having little success. She insisted that her writing was just for fun and for the enjoyment of her friends and family; she was convinced that no one else would be interested.*

*Deborah looked up and smiled as he walked into the room, and Gideon's heart turned over. He wondered if there would ever come a time when he didn't think she was beautiful, but he couldn't imagine that happening. He bent and kissed her lightly, before sitting on the edge of the desk and looking down at her, seriously.*

*"We have a problem."*

*Deborah looked up at him quizzically, and silently waited for him to continue. Gideon went on to explain about the invitation to the reception that evening. "So get out your best dress and wash behind your ears again, because tonight you're going to meet an Emperor."*

*Deborah grinned at him. "Is that all? I've already met the President and Entil'zha this week, so I'm getting blasé about all these important people. Should I practice my curtsy?"*

*Gideon laughed as he reached out to caress her face, "Can't do any harm, but there's something else we should probably practice. They may expect us to dance."*

*He watched as Deborah's face went blank. She took a deep breath and whispered, "Oh no! Not in public, not real dancing. Matthew, we can't..." she stopped as he pressed his fingers to her lips.*

*"We may have to. I know that we have four left feet between us, but we're going to have to try. Come on." Gideon pulled his wife up out of her chair and into his arms. Kissing her quickly, he called out to the computer to play some suitable dance music.*

*Five minutes later, they were both sitting on the sofa in Deborah's quarters, rubbing sore feet. The Captain thought they were about even; he had trodden on Deborah's toes just about as often as she had trodden on his, but his wife was complaining. "The trouble is that you'll be wearing proper shoes, while my toes are going to be out in the open. Tread on my feet when I'm wearing sandals, and they'll hear me scream back on Minbar!"*

Gideon grabbed the foot Deborah was rubbing, and pulled her shoe off. He caressed her foot for a moment, then bent to kiss her toes gently, and smiled up at her. "OK, so I have a back injury that totally prevents me from dancing, and you are far too devoted a wife to dance with anyone else. I really don't think we'll get away with my usual 'grab ass and shuffle' style of dancing at a formal event, and even that has been known to do permanent damage to my partner's feet. You know, I'd hate to damage these feet." He kissed her toes again. "Such pretty feet."

Deborah reached out and stroked his hair, smiling suggestively. "Pretty big feet. Matthew, I may be a lousy dancer when I'm vertical, but I do a fantastic horizontal mambo. Do we have time for me to show you?"

Gideon checked the clock. [A little after 16:20. We have to be in the landing bay for 18:00. Plenty of time.] He pushed her back down onto the sofa and started to unbutton her shirt.

When he had Deborah completely naked on the sofa beneath him, Gideon leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Dance with me."

Gideon was tugging at the collar of his dress uniform when Deborah emerged from the bedroom and his heart stopped. She was wearing the black velvet dress she'd worn when she was pregnant. It left her shoulders bare, and the tight fitting bodice supported her breasts and emphasized her cleavage. Where previously the full skirt had been cut to leave room for her swollen belly, the panels had been restyled to fall flat at the front, showing her spectacular figure to full advantage. Deborah had put her hair up into a simple pleat, with soft curls falling around her face, the style enhancing her long, elegant neck.

The Captain pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her shoulder, running his fingers along the white gold collar that she wore. "I've never seen you wear jewelry before, other than these." He took her left hand in his and kissed the finger on which she wore his rings. "Isn't this the necklace we got Angel for her birthday last year?"

Deborah nodded. "From what I've read, the Centauri like a lot of decoration, so I thought I'd better wear something. Angel loaned me this. I couldn't borrow earrings though. She and Lily both have pierced ears and I don't."

"Too bad Dureena isn't here. She could probably acquire something for you." Gideon kissed his wife again and pulled her tightly against him, running his hand over her hip and down her thigh, feeling for what she wore under the dress. "The Emperor will be honored that you've made the effort." His hand paused in its wandering. "You've got those black stockings on, haven't you?" Deborah smiled and nodded. "Then I think my bad back might get a lot worse fairly early this evening, so we'll have to come home. Do you have those big, woolen knickers on, too?" He grinned at the memory of what she'd *really* worn under that dress when he'd last seen her in it, and out of it, on Eriadne.

This time Deborah shook her head and he moved his hand back to her hip, trying to feel through the heavy, velvet fabric. "I can't feel anything. Deborah, you are wearing panties, aren't you?"

She shook her head again and grinned. "Knowing how you get when I wear my stockings, I thought I'd better not put any obstacles in your way. When we get home, you can just flip my skirt over my head and fuck me. Just try to wait until we get back in here, will you? Taking me up against the wall in the corridor might startle the crew."



*Gideon groaned, feeling himself swelling as she spoke. "Shut up, will you? You sent me off with a raging erection the first time I met the Emperor, I don't need you doing that again!"*

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*Strapping himself into his seat in the shuttle, Gideon looked at his family and friends. Deborah sat next to him, carefully adjusting the straps of the seat belt to ensure that her dress didn't get crushed. Luke sat the other side of her, looking suave and sophisticated in a black tuxedo. Gideon wished he could have dressed like that for the evening. Looking like a penguin was preferable to itching inside his dress uniform.*

*Angel sat opposite him, wearing a long, red, satin dress. Tiny straps held up the low cut bodice, which clung to her breasts, waist and hips before flaring out into a full skirt. With her hair lifted up, and curls falling about her ears, Angel looked good enough to eat. Gideon quickly pushed that thought aside and moved his eyes to his XO, sitting between Angel and Lily. The Captain could never understand how John looked so comfortable in his dress uniform. Somehow it seemed to fit him properly, which Gideon's never had, and the Captain had never seen John scratch. Why didn't his uniform itch as much as Gideon's did?*

*Putting that mystery aside, the Captain smiled as he watched Lily. She was sitting at the end of the row of seats, reaching out her leg to touch toes with Luke, who was sitting opposite her. Her tiny foot was enclosed in a green, silk slipper, which matched the medieval style, green dress that Lily wore. The color was a perfect match for the emerald ring she wore on her finger, the ring John had given her, and for the emerald earrings that just showed through her flaming red hair. Gideon smiled as he remembered how he and Deborah had given those earrings to Lily when her daughter, Naima, was born. He still wondered if Naima was his daughter, but he pushed that thought away quickly, too.*

*One thing Gideon was sure of; the Emperor would *not* be disappointed. He was about to meet the three most beautiful women in the galaxy.*

*As the shuttle left the landing bay, the Captain leaned forward as far as his seatbelt would allow and spoke. "OK, tonight we have fun, but we all need to stay alert. Listen to what's said, and what's not said. Luke, I need you to get as close to Mollari as you can. I know we can't take any instruments in, but check him out visually. I want to know what you think about his state of health. Angel," he looked across at his wife's sister and smiled, "You're our secret weapon. Watch out for trouble. If anything starts, do whatever you have to do to protect your sisters, OK?"*

*Angel nodded seriously as Gideon turned to his wife. "Deborah, I want you to get close to the Emperor. Somehow, I doubt if that will be difficult. The difficulty might be in fending him off politely." He smiled as he took her hand and kissed it. "Just keep flashing your wedding ring in his face. That might work. I need to know how he's feeling: what he says when he's telling the truth, and what he lies about."*

*He looked up the length of the shuttle as he spoke to John and Lily. "I need you two to watch and listen. Try to get a feel for how the court's reacting, to us and to Mollari. I want to know what undercurrents might exist, how much support the Emperor has from his court for this peace initiative."*

*Gideon paused, put on his most disarming smile, and lowered his voice so the pilot and co-pilot couldn't hear what he said. "And I need you two to do something else, too. If there's dancing afterwards, you are going to have to lead off. You've all seen what happens when Deborah and I try to dance. Given that my charming wife has chosen not to wear her underwear tonight, I don't want to trip her up and have her land on her back with her skirt over her head. It might just give the Emperor the wrong impression."*

*That earned him a thump on the arm from Deborah and a delighted giggle from Angel. Luke, John and*

*Lily all grinned at his wife, who was now blushing furiously.*

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*Demon sat at the conference table, yawning so widely she thought her jaw would crack.*

*They had left the reception the previous night as early as they could, but even so, it had been after ship's midnight when they'd got back. She and Matthew had detoured via the Medbay crèche to check on Marcus, and arrived just in time for him to wake up screaming from a nightmare. Demon had sighed and taken him from the nurse, trying to soothe him through their link. After a few minutes, she had suggested to her husband that as he had a long day ahead of him the next day, he should go on to their quarters, and she would join him as soon as she had the child settled again.*

*Matthew had agreed, and kissing her and Marcus, had left Medbay. It had taken Demon nearly an hour to get her son back to sleep, and when she had finally gone back to her rooms, she'd found her husband fast asleep, sprawled on his back diagonally across their bed, snoring loudly. Demon had smiled, always loving the way Matthew looked when he slept, even when he was snoring, but regretting the fact that she'd have to wait for another occasion to get her skirt flipped over her head. She'd undressed quickly and quietly, sliding into bed next to him. Matthew had half awoken and pulled her to his side, then they'd both slept deeply.*

*When the alarm had awoken them less than five hours later, Demon had groaned. She had never been a morning person, and as far as she was concerned, six was a time that should only exist in the evening. On this occasion, Matthew had called a briefing session in the conference room for 07:00, so that he and John could leave for the planet below, fully briefed, by 08:00.*

*Demon had lain still, as she'd heard Matthew cursing and calling the alarm to turn off, then smiled as she'd felt his arms go around her. He'd whispered, "We have a little time, shall we make up for what we missed last night?" So they did.*

*Now Demon was feeling tired but contented, as she sipped coffee and watched the doors open to admit Angel, with Lily, John and Luke following close behind. Demon thought they all looked outrageously bright and perky, as Matthew called the meeting to order. He turned to Luke first.*

*"OK, Doc, what can you tell me about the Emperor?"*

*Luke frowned. "Limited. He has a history of heart trouble, but seems fully recovered. There's some evidence of prolonged alcohol abuse, but on the whole, he seems pretty much average for a Centauri of his age and class."*

*Matthew leaned forward on the table. "Anything that would explain how he sobered up so quickly when John and I first met him? I noticed that he kept well away from the wine last night. Sober as a judge all night."*

*The doctor shook his head. "Nothing I could tell without instruments, Captain."*

*Matthew turned to Lily and John and asked for their comments. They both confirmed that the Centauri court seemed split in their attitude to the peace initiative. Some supported it, but many still opposed the idea of the Centauri Empire resuming its place in the ISA.*

*"So how does Mollari plan to force this through? He can't expect to ride roughshod over the opposition in*

*the Centaurum, surely? I'm beginning to have serious concerns about this whole thing." The Captain sat back in his chair and considered. "I'll see how today's talks go, but if we don't seem to be getting anywhere, we're out of here."*

*He turned to Demon, "Unless you can tell me anything to make me think differently? I saw that the Emperor didn't seem to object to you getting close to him." Matthew smiled at her, "Not that I could blame him. What could you read?"*

*Demon frowned and considered. "It was really odd. Sometimes he gave off the emotions I'd expected from how you'd described him. Sorrow, tiredness, mixed with some pleasure at being with people whose company he enjoyed. He particularly enjoyed looking down my cleavage when we talked, and getting his hands on Lily and Angel when they danced." She grinned across at her sisters then became serious again. "But it was weird; when he was talking to you about the ISA and his intentions, it was if someone else was speaking. All the other emotions disappeared. He became very cold and controlled..." Demon trailed off, struggling to put what she'd picked up into words.*

*Matthew squeezed her hand gently, silently encouraging her to continue.*

*"OK, here's an example. At one point, he was telling Angel how much he missed humans, and how wonderful it was to have lovely human ladies back in his palace. He was telling the truth then. I could feel his pleasure in talking to Angel, and in dancing with her. A few minutes later, he was talking to you, Matthew, and he was saying almost the same thing, but this time he was lying. When he told you that he wanted to see humans on Centauri Prime again, he was totally controlled and lying through his teeth. This time, when he said the word 'human' I picked up hatred, not the affection he'd felt before. I don't understand it at all."*

*The Captain sat silent for a moment then said, "Odd. Unless the Emperor is suffering from some kind of spilt personality disorder?" He turned to Luke, raising his eyebrows in query.*

*Luke shrugged. "Nothing obvious externally, but I'm not really qualified to judge. You'd need a psychiatrist for that."*

*Matthew nodded and turned to Angel, smiling. "You seemed to enjoy the company of that handsome young Centauri, Angel. Did you get anything useful out of him?"*

*Demon watched as Angel flushed slightly at Matthew's comment then she smiled. "His name is Ursa Baronni, and he's the Minister's nephew. He told me quite a lot about who is influential at court, and who isn't. I'll put it in a detailed report later, but the main thing that came across was that there are a lot of people at court, and in the Centaurum, who feel the time for their isolation may be over. Ursa made it clear that his uncle is one of the old school, wanting to stay out of the ISA, but that the younger generation wants to get out into the galaxy again. Maybe the Emperor is responding to that?" Angel looked at Matthew, obviously hoping for his approval. Demon could see her sister's pleasure when the Captain smiled at her.*

*"Interesting. Thanks for that, Angel. Young Baronni may be worth cultivating, and you'll get chance this evening. I'm going to invite Mollari and a few of his court up here to a reception on the ship. It wouldn't be my first choice to let them on board, but we don't have much option but to reciprocate their hospitality. We'll use the mess hall closest to the landing bay, and keep them in there. No tours of the ship this time."*

*Demon could feel the anger and regret that surged through her husband, as he remembered the mistake he*

*felt he'd made over the Stryvsteptixi, and the price paid for that mistake. He pushed the feelings away and turned to Demon to ask her to liaise with Jackson in ensuring that everything was prepared for the reception. Then he and John stood. It was time for them to go back down to the planet and start the talks.*

*Demon accompanied Matthew and the others down to the landing bay. Hugging him tightly, she whispered, "Be careful," before stepping back and watching the shuttle taking him and John away from them. It wasn't the first time that Demon had stood at the window overlooking the landing bay, watching a ship take her husband away while wondering if she would ever see him again.*

### The Court

*The first day's meeting had gone well. The Centauri negotiating team had been open about what they wanted from the ISA and what they expected to have to contribute to get it. Both parties had agreed to identify and put aside potential areas of conflict until they could get an outline heads of agreement in place, then move onto the points of disagreement, seeing where they could be offset against each other. As a result, by the end of the first day, a broad agreement in principle had been reached.*

*Gideon sat back in his seat on the shuttle, thinking, [But the devil is always in the detail.]*



*Despite his healthy skepticism, he was pleased with progress. The Centauries had been much more constructive and open than he'd expected. On a number of occasions Matheson had been able to step in and supply detailed facts and figures that had overcome potential obstacles, and they had achieved a lot in one day. There were only two flies in the ointment, as far as Gideon was concerned.*

*First was the Emperor. While his words had been smooth and reassuring, his face had been set in an expression of profound sadness. Several times when they had been discussing a point of contention, Gideon had caught Mollari staring at him. He might almost have believed that the Emperor was trying to warn him about something, but every time, the words Mollari spoke had soon overcome the difficulties. It was a part of the same puzzle Deborah had identified. It seemed the Emperor was at war with himself.*

*The second worry was this evening's reception. Gideon sighed at the thought of another night of entertaining and being polite to court officials, when all he really wanted to do was to go home and play with his son and his wife. He smiled to himself, [Especially my wife.] The Captain mulled over some of the games they could play, then pushed those thoughts aside, not wanting to have John tease him about becoming aroused on the shuttle, *again*.*

*As the shuttle settled in the landing bay, Gideon sent John off duty, telling him to go spend some time with his family. The Captain then proceeded to the nearest mess hall, to see how Deborah and Jackson had got on with preparing it for the evening's entertainment.*

*The doors slid open and Gideon's jaw nearly hit the floor. The entire room had been draped with brocade and voile curtains, and a long table set up on one side of the room, covered with linen, flowers, silverware and crystal. The room was alive with the colors and scents of the flowers, matched perfectly to the vibrant tints of the drapes. The mess hall looked and smelled like a high-class brothel, but Gideon knew that this was high Centauri court fashion. [And I'd better not make that comparison out loud, or Deborah might*

*ask me how I know what a high-class brothel looks and smells like. I never did get around to telling her about getting arrested for being John's pimp...]* He just didn't understand how one of his mess halls could have been turned into this in a day.

*As he walked into the center of the room, Deborah crawled out from under the table, carefully lifting the white linen tablecloth as she emerged, making sure that nothing on the table was disturbed. Seeing her husband standing in the middle of the room, she grinned up at him. "Just checking the table. One of the legs was a bit wobbly." Gideon helped her up from the floor, and she bent over, dusting her knees as she spoke.*

*Gideon turned slowly, taking in all the details of the room, before turning back to her. "How in hell did you do this in one day?"*

*Deborah grinned. "Angel's friend, Ursa, put me in touch with a banquet organizer. I told her what I wanted, Lieutenant Jackson helped out with the shuttles to get the stuff up here, and Angel and Lily have been in here all day, helping me. The banquet lady brought in the furniture and a couple of her own staff, plus all the food and the flowers, and I told her that she'd get a bonus if it was all done before you got back. She liked that idea, so here we are. I had a Centauri chef brought up for the evening too, and he's working with our cooks right now. And before you say anything..." Deborah raised her hand to stop Gideon's next words. "Lieutenant Jackson provided guards for all the Centauries we've had on board. Very discrete, but they've been escorted and watched every moment. No chance for any of them to do anything they shouldn't. And I've had a sweep done, and none of the flowers have bugs. Well, not the electronic kind, anyway."*

*Gideon pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. "You think of everything, don't you? Maybe you should be Captain, and I'll retire and write my memoirs."*

*Deborah draped her arms around his neck and smiled. "But I much prefer to work under the Captain." This time she initiated the deep, passionate kiss that followed.*

*The Captain eventually broke for breath and looked around again. "Just two more questions. How much did this cost, and how did you pay for it? I doubt if ISA credits are worth much on Centauri Prime."*

*Deborah told him how Ursa had also put them in touch with a rare book dealer. "I think I got a reasonable deal, but if we go on spending like this, we may have to go back to Eriadne and raid the library again."*

*Gideon looked at her with concern. "You didn't sell any of your favorites did you? I'll probably be able to get the credits for all this from Sheridan, but those books are irreplaceable."*

*His wife reassured him that she had sold nothing they really cared for. "Now, do me a favor will you? I need to put a few finishing touches on things here, then I'll have to go and change for dinner. Marcus has been complaining through our link that I haven't played with him today. Could you go see him in the crèche on your way back to our quarters and spend a little time with him? It would make up for me neglecting him today."*

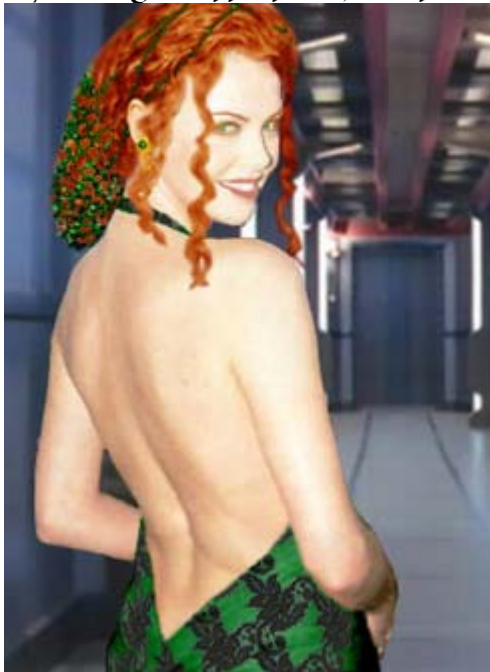
*"You never neglect him, and of course I'll go see him." Gideon kissed her again and hugged her tightly. "And the next time I want a miracle performed, I'll know who to ask." With one last kiss, he left the room and headed for the Medbay crèche.*

Deborah and Gideon arrived outside the landing bay while the Emperor's shuttle was still on approach, quickly followed by Angel. Gideon took one look at the dress Angel was wearing and swallowed hard. The ruby red velvet encased her upper body like a glove. The sleeves wrapped around her upper arms leaving her shoulders bare, and the bodice lifted and displayed the swelling of her breasts. Fitted tightly as far as the waist, with an intricate design etched into the velvet, the dress then flared into a full, swirling skirt, with a small train at the back. It was a darker color than her usual scarlet, but it complemented her pale skin and raven hair perfectly. Gideon felt a flare of lust as he looked at her, which he quickly suppressed. He smiled at his wife's sister and said, "I don't think I've ever seen you look more beautiful, Angel. Poor Ursa won't know what's hit him."

Angel blushed at his compliment and at the reference to the Centauri, who was accompanying the Emperor to the reception. Gideon could tell that she was attracted to the young man, and that the attraction was mutual. He curbed his jealousy, constantly aware of Deborah at his side. The Captain knew that his wife tried not to pick up on his feelings, but he also knew that if he felt strongly about something, she couldn't help herself.

A flash of color in the corner of his eye provided a welcome distraction, and he turned to see Luke and John arriving with Lily walking between them, a hand on each of their arms. For the next few moments, Gideon's thoughts became a random jumble. The dress that Lily was wearing, [Is wearing the right word? It just sort of clings in strategic places!] sent his temperature and blood pressure soaring. It was green satin, covered in black lace, the halter-neck cut low enough to display the snake tattoo on her right breast. So low that Gideon wasn't sure how it managed to cover her nipples, but somehow it did.

As Lily walked past him to look out of the window into the landing bay, Gideon stopped breathing. Her hair was braided, then caught up into a net at the back, so the masses of red curls were neatly confined, only covering the upper part of her spine. Below that, her naked back was fully displayed. Gideon's eyes



drifted down and down, taking in the curve of her spine, the dimples just below her tiny waist, finally stopping where the material just covered the cleft between her buttocks. [Only just!] The dress fell behind her, forming a small train that swept along the deck.

"You're drooling." Deborah's whisper brought him to his senses. "If you don't put your tongue back in your mouth, it'll get dusty from where it's dragging on the floor."

Gideon looked round to see his wife's amused smile. He whispered back, "She'll start a riot in that dress! I think I'd better call in the Marines to keep order."

Deborah grinned at him and leaned in closer. "Wait until you see what she and John have planned for after dinner."

The Captain's eyes widened. "I don't think I want to know!" Then he looked fondly at his wife as she frowned down at her own simple black dress. The tiny beaded straps held up a simple shift, cut to follow her curves without clinging to them, dropping to the floor. The neckline was cut low enough to raise Gideon's temperature. [And that's not all!]

Deborah looked up at him, suddenly concerned. "Should I have worn something grander? I don't want to let you down."

*He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her gently on the cheek before whispering in her ear, "Lily may be beautifully gilded and Angel looks heavenly, but my silly goose is still my favorite chick."*

*Gideon watched as Deborah flushed and smiled, then turned his attention to the squad of guards standing to one side, all in full dress uniform.*

*"We're calling you an honor guard, a gesture of how important the Emperor's safety is to us, but you're here to watch them. You watch their every move and if any one of them tries to leave the main party, you politely but firmly herd them back. Try not to kill any of them without a direct order." He turned back to the window to watch as the Emperor's shuttle settled in the landing bay. "OK, people, it's show-time."*

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*Gideon watched closely as the table was cleared of the last remnants of the meal, leaving only coffee cups and various glasses. Deborah had somehow arranged for some fine old Brevari to be delivered, and Minister Baronni had enthused about the quality of the liquor. Emperor Mollari had taken a tiny sip, commented on the smoothness and flavor, then left the rest of his glass untouched, as he had with all the wines served during the meal. Gideon wondered if he were embarrassed about having been drunk when they first met, and was ensuring that there was no repetition.*

*The Excalibur crew had performed perfectly as serving staff, despite any previous lack of experience. The Captain had bitten his lip to stop himself laughing when he'd seen his Deputy Head of Security carrying in a tray of hors d'oeuvres. He'd promised himself that someday he'd find out where Barlow had been trained as a waiter.*

*The food had been excellent and even Mollari had commented that the Spoo was aged to perfection. The Emperor also seemed pleased with the seating plan, which had put him between Deborah and Angel. While some of the other Centauri had brought female companions, Mollari had arrived alone, and seemed to appreciate being seated between two of the most beautiful women in the room.*

*Gideon took a deep breath and stood, gently tapping his coffee spoon against his glass. When he had everyone's attention, he launched into a speech of thanks to the cooks and servers, compliments to his guests and then turned to his First Officer. "Commander Matheson whispered something in my ear as we sat down to dinner. He told me that he and his partner, the beautiful Lilith Morgaine, have a little entertainment planned for us. John?"*

*The Captain looked expectantly at his XO, wondering exactly what John and Lily had planned. What worried him was the look of surprise that had crossed Lily's face as he spoke. [I hope you know what you're doing, John!]*

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*[What?] Lily was completely taken by surprise by Matthew's announcement. [John didn't mention...] Becoming aware of everybody's attention turning to her and John, she quickly assumed a neutral expression and looked at him. His amused grin answered the questions floating through her mind.*

*Lightly touching his hand and forcing a smile to her lips, Lily thought at him, [/Oh no, you didn't!/] although she already knew the answer. [/I'm not ready! Besides, I'm wearing the wrong dress, we'll get tangled in the train.../]*



*[/That's what the loop at the end of the train is for, isn't it? And yes, you are./] John gave her a confident smile.*

*Stalling, Lily took a sip of wine, her mind reeling. She couldn't see a way out without embarrassing John, Matthew and their whole delegation. Setting down the glass, Lily resigned herself to the inevitable, giving John a mental sigh. [/You're learning all the wrong things from Matthew./] She gracefully bent down to pick up the train and slid her right middle finger through the loop at the end.*

*John lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it lightly before they stood. He gave her a broad smile. "Let's tango."*

*As they walked around the table and to the empty half of the mess hall, Lily threw a quick look at their audience, seeing their anticipation and hearing their speculations as to what she and John might have planned. [Yeah, right... though I'm sure there's one person at that table who knew about John's plan.] She looked over to where Luke sat, grinning.*

*He winked at her and mouthed, "You'll do fine." Feeling her stomach do a somersault at the thought of what was to follow, Lily gave him a sweet smile, promising retribution.*

*As John walked her to the middle of the mess hall, Lily held herself proudly, head high, and her graceful movements belying the anxiousness he could feel inside her. But there was also excitement that he trusted her dancing skills enough to risk this, and a determination not to fail; to give their guests a good show. John didn't have a doubt that she would. Lily had a natural feel for rhythm and melody, as they all knew already, and she was an exceptionally quick student when it came to dancing. Teaching her to dance tango had been an easy, interesting, and joyful task.*

*One evening a few months before, John had come home after his shift to find Lily listening to a 20th century song with strong tango elements. When he had remarked on it, Lily had admitted she'd always loved to listen to the music and to watch tango dancers, but had never tried it herself.*

*"Would you like to?" John had asked.*

*"Love to, but we don't have any tango teachers on the Excalibur."*

*"Well, not a teacher maybe, but someone who used to dance tango a lot, many years ago," he'd answered with a smile.*

*"Really? Who's that?"*

*Instead of answering Lily's question, John had held out his hand and bowed slightly. "Would Milady give me the pleasure of this dance?" Before Lily could react, he'd taken her hand in his and pulled her to her feet, and with another tug whirled her around and into his arms. And so the first lesson had begun.*

*[I hadn't realized how much I missed the tango until I started dancing again.] John thought. He hadn't*

*practiced since... [Stop! Not now.] John banned the memories from his mind and concentrated on the moment.*

*Lily must have sensed John's momentary mood change, but she didn't ask any questions. Instead she sent him a wave of love, and he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb in thanks, as they bowed before the Emperor.*

*"Which song?" Lily whispered as they got into position.*

*"La Cumparsita," he whispered back, smiling as she raised her eyebrows and muttered under her breath that he should count himself lucky this was one of her favorite songs from their training sessions. John nodded to Barlow, who dimmed the lights around the table, and then the music started.*

*"La Cumparsita" was a classic, and had a wonderful quick stepping rhythm with a slower melody carrying on top of it, making it possible to vary their pace from one part of the tune to the next. Lily reacted immediately to John's leads, letting herself be guided by him completely. He could feel her concentration, her body taut but flexible, and how she was absorbed in the music, open to his directions as he led her across and around the floor. Their minds weren't joined, but their bodies moved as one, in harmony with the melody and rhythm. John kept their moves simple, only occasionally adding embellishments. There was time for more of that later, if their audience approved, and he suspected they would.*

*During the last half minute of the short tune, they whirled around and around to the melody, eyes locked, then John stopped, opening to the left, pulling Lily tighter against his body and slightly up into a Leventada, her left leg sliding up his right with the last note of the song.*

*For a long moment, they just stood there, looking at each other, and John could feel that Lily was as exhilarated as he was. She was panting slightly, her eyes sparkling and her face almost glowing as she sent, [/*We did it!*]/*

*John gave her a proud smile. [/*You did it!*]/*

*Suddenly, they became aware that the lights had brightened again, and the crew and guests were clapping, mixed with some whistling. They broke the pose and turned towards the table, John lightly holding Lily's hand as they bowed. John could see a lot of surprised smiles on the faces of his crew mates, a wide grin on Luke's, and Gideon was shaking his head as if he wanted to say, "How could you keep this from me for so long?"*

*John sighed softly. [I just wish my teacher could be here to enjoy this moment with us.]*

*Still clapping, Emperor Mollari looked past Deborah to Gideon and said, smiling, "Your First Officer has many talents, Captain."*

*Gideon nodded in agreement. "And I keep discovering new ones all the time. Commander Matheson is the best XO I ever had, and before you ask, Your Majesty, he is *not* available."*

*Mollari laughed, then turned towards Matheson and his wife, calling out to them. "A very enjoyable performance, Commander, Madame. I am sure you have another dance or two in your repertoire to delight an old man?"*

John inclined his head, a slight smile playing around his lips. "You honor us, Your Majesty. And we do indeed."

---

*[/OK, what now?/] Lily asked, surprised to find that she was quite happy to do another dance. This wasn't the first time she had danced in front of strangers, but the first time she had done so with a partner.*

*[/You'll find out in a moment./] He pulled her close with her back towards him so her right arm crossed in front of her as he held her hand in his left, and Barlow dimmed the lights again.*

*"Let's tango," a raw female voice announced, and Lily's eyes had just enough time to widen in recognition before she found herself whirled away from John, pulled back towards him into the standard position, and swung left and right to the four sharp drum beats that followed.*

*This song was what Lily liked to call a rock/tango hybrid. She had it in her constantly growing collection of late 20<sup>th</sup> century music, and she loved the passion and energy both in the music and the singer's voice. That passion naturally transferred to their dancing. Lily could almost physically feel the raw energy build between John's and her bodies as he slowly led her backwards to the bandoneon melody. As the female voice started singing, their moves became more aggressive, and John led her into a wider variety of moves and embellishments.*

*feel the drama rise  
look deep into my eyes  
let's tango, let's tango  
let the rhythm spin you  
feel it deep within you  
let's tango, let's tango*

*The chorus included many small, quick figure eights, Lily's torso remaining almost parallel to John's and only her legs and hips turning.*

*let's tango  
we tango  
you and me tango!  
tango! tango!*

*The driving rhythm demanded whip-like leg movements including "ganchos" where Lily's leg would hook around John's, or vice versa. Lily didn't think, only felt the music, with every fiber of her being. She let herself be swept away by the music and John's lead, until nothing else existed, only the music, John, herself, and the dance that arose from this combination.*

---

*Luke was totally enraptured by John and Lily's third and last dance. He'd helped John choose the music, and he had seen the two of them dance to all of these songs countless times in the past few months, but he still couldn't help but be in awe of how perfectly they moved together.*

*It was a slow, sensuous version of an old instrumental song called "Oblivion", and the title fitted perfectly*

*since his lovers seemed oblivious to everything outside their embrace. John and Lily's dance was in complete contrast to their last one, which had been pure, raw passion. Now their slow, languid, cat-like moves expressed total devotion, sensuality, eroticism--love.*

*Some of the moves, Luke recognized from many hours of watching, but his mind was in no state to come up with the names. Having to watch them dance like this was pure torture. Part of Luke was convinced that Lily just wanted to punish him for not telling her about John's plans. [Well, if that's the case, she's succeeded! But by all the Gods, they are perfect together.] He smiled wistfully as Lily slid her leg up John's, slowly, her left hand wrapped around the back of his neck, looking up at him with what could only be described as rapture. [I'll never reach their skill in dancing. Well, not vertically anyway...]*

*Luke had to suppress a groan as he thought about how much longer they might have to stay here after John and Lily had finished dancing, when he wanted nothing more than go to their quarters with them and let them show him some new moves in the horizontal tango. [At least I'm sitting away from them, keeping me from temptation. I'd hate to embarrass our delegation!]*

*"Feeling uncomfortable, Doc? I hope nothing... inappropriate is up?" Luke suddenly heard Angel murmur, amusement in her voice.*

*He replied quietly, "Careful what you say, Angel, I haven't finalized the new shift plan for Medbay yet," only looking at her long enough to give her a malicious smile.*

*"You wouldn't!"*

*Luke frowned, as if puzzled, but kept watching as John gracefully walked around Lily, turning her on the spot. "I wouldn't? Are you sure?"*

*Angel growled in mock frustration. "No, I'm not..."*

*Lowering her voice another notch so Mollari, who thankfully was busy talking to Demon, wouldn't hear, she continued, "Lily seems to be a bad influence on you. I think I'll need to have words with her after she finishes dancing." She giggled when Luke shot her a warning look. "On the other hand, I think that can wait."*

*The last notes of the last song had died away, and John was standing there, with Lily's body close to his, her left hand cradling the back of his neck, her right lying in his left, and his right hand resting against her bare spine just above her waist. Her green eyes were sparkling as she looked up at him, her lips slightly open. He couldn't resist leaning down and kissing her.*

*Only when they broke the kiss did he become aware that everybody in the room was clapping, and from the way Lily blinked her eyes, it was the same for her. John gave her a wide smile, then turned to bow before their audience while Lily curtsied. When they straightened again, John saw that everybody was standing, still applauding. He was overwhelmed. [I don't know what I was expecting, but surely not this!] After another bow and curtesy, he and Lily made their way back to their seats. Before they got there, Demon and Matthew walked up to them, but John was barely able to concentrate on what they were saying.*

*It was as though one part of him had gone back to another night when he had danced, many years ago, while the other part of him was here, overwhelmed by the congratulations and warm feelings that were*

being expressed toward him and Lily. He was still half in trance from the dance, and still feeling the sexual tension that was always created by dancing with Lily. Although somehow he wasn't holding her hand anymore--[She must have let go when Demon hugged her.]--the tiny redhead was still standing close, and John could feel that she was in much the same state as he was.

Suddenly, his thoughts were pierced by Emperor Mollari's presence and words. "A truly wonderful performance!" Mollari exclaimed, and proceeded to kiss Lily's hand. Still holding it lightly, he turned to Matheson and said quietly, "I could see in your dance how much you and your wife love each other, Commander. I once loved like that but lost her. Hold on to your love, Commander, and don't let her go." He offered Lily's hand for John to take, which he did.

Puzzled and moved at the same time by the Emperor's words, John nodded and smiled at Lily, squeezing her hand and feeling her squeeze back as she beamed up at him. "I will, Your Majesty. I always will."

---

Mollari had barely left when Angel ran up to them, overtaking Luke, and threw her arms around Lily, who found herself whirled around in a full circle before being set down again. "Wonderful! You were absolutely amazing!" Angel kept one arm around Lily as she continued, with a naughty grin, "Where can I apply for lessons with that talented husband of yours?"

Lily laughed, but looked up when she heard someone clear his throat behind Angel. Luke was standing there, giving Angel a sweet smile as she turned. "Would you mind?"

Angel kept her arm around Lily as she asked, "Mind what?" returning the sweet smile, but immediately let go when Luke gave her a mock glare. "OK, OK." She squeezed John's arm lightly. "I'd better not keep you up too long." She gave him a naughty grin, adding, "Have fun," then left with a soft laugh to go to where Ursa was standing with the Emperor, Matthew and Demon.

Luke shook his head, grinning widely, then pulled Lily and John into a hug. "You were incredible!" he said aloud, then added in a whisper, "I had to wait a bit to get myself back under control, but I can't say Angel's teasing was helping. So you'd better take me home soon, or I can't guarantee anything."

Lily giggled with delight, then looked questioningly at John when Luke released them from his embrace.

John gave them a conspiratorial smile. *[//I'll do my best.//]*

---

Gideon and Deborah were standing with the Emperor, Ursa and Angel when John walked up to them and said in a low voice, "Excuse me, Captain?"

Gideon smiled at the others in apology, then stepped away from the group, following John to where Lily and Luke were waiting, out of earshot of the others.

"Yes?"

"Could you please make our excuses to our guests? Dancing like that is rather exhausting..."

*[Yeah, I bet there's something not exhausted yet, but it soon will be.]* Gideon kept his face straight as he pretended to consider John's request for a moment, then said apologetically, "Well, I'm sorry to keep you

*up, gentlemen, but it would be impolite for you to leave before our guests. Why don't you just sit down for a while and make small-talk? That should refresh you. I'm sure there's nothing else you'd rather be doing anyway, is there?"*

*Before her partners could react, Lily sidled up to Gideon, and using her body to shield what she was doing from view, reached out to lightly squeeze his balls, whispering, "You either let me take my men out of here right now, or I may just decide I need to take you right here on the dance floor, Captain."*

*Looking down into the tiny redhead's eyes, Gideon gulped. He was sure she was bluffing. [Then again, you never know with these witches.] And he knew the look in Lily's eyes; it was the same one Deborah had when she wanted him, now! He looked pleadingly over at his wife, but she just stood there grinning, shaking her head almost imperceptibly while listening to the conversation between Ursa and Angel. She wouldn't help him get out of this miserable situation. [Why doesn't that surprise me? It's a wonder John, Luke and I have anything to say at all with the sisters sticking together like they do.] Gideon let out a resigned sigh, then looked back at the threesome and nodded frantically.*

*Lily let go of his balls, smiling up at him. "Thank you, Captain. I knew you'd understand."*

*Gideon gave her a look telling her not to push her luck, then glared at John and Luke in warning. Both did their best to keep their faces straight and they contented themselves with thanking him and wishing him a good night before leaving.*

### Opening Statements

*Gideon watched as his First Officer, Doctor and Lily left the mess hall, his brain working overtime. He turned and walked to where Mollari stood watching, pretending to listen to something that Angel and Ursa were talking about, but obviously not having missed much of the exchange between the Captain and Lily. Gideon just hoped that Mollari hadn't seen her grab his balls. [Don't want to give him ideas for the negotiations!]*

*Smiling smoothly, Gideon started his lies. "Please forgive the discourtesy, Your Majesty. My First Officer and his partner have three children, and we have been advised that one of them is unwell. The Doctor has accompanied them to make sure that it's nothing too serious." He did not intend to try to describe the Luke/John/Lily ménage to Mollari. He knew that the Centauri were polygamous, but as far as he was aware, it was always one man to multiple wives, never the other way around. The last thing he needed was the Emperor deciding that John was some kind of pervert for being part of a relationship that would be frowned upon by the Centauri.*

*Mollari inclined his head graciously. "Quite all right, Captain, but I do have a favor to ask. Your lovely wife has been resisting all my advances," Gideon gritted his teeth, wondering what was coming, "and she absolutely refuses to dance with me. I'm sure if you give your permission, she will change her mind."*

*Inwardly amused at the idea of Deborah needing his permission to do *anything*, Gideon tried to avert the impending disaster. "I'm sure that my wife has told you that she does not dance as well as her sisters. I know that Angel would be delighted..." He trailed off as the Emperor shook his head, vehemently.*

*"The lovely Angel is otherwise occupied with my Minister's nephew." He gestured toward where Angel and Ursa were now dancing, "I should consider it a great favor, Captain. Please, indulge an old man."*

*Gideon turned to Deborah and gave her his most charming smile. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "Can't see a way out of this. Try not to cripple him." The look she gave him as she turned away, her hand on the Emperor's arm, should have made the Captain drop dead on the spot.*

*For the next five minutes, Gideon winced repeatedly as Deborah 'danced' with Mollari. [That'll teach the old bastard to listen to me when I try to head him off.] On at least one occasion, the Captain's wife nearly tripped the Emperor, and on several more she trod on his toes. Gideon cringed as he recalled all too clearly what that felt like. Deborah was a big girl and not exactly light on her feet.*

*Mollari finally limped back to join him, handing Deborah back to her husband. Gideon bowed politely as he took her hand and tried not to laugh out loud at the Emperor's pained expression. Mollari's murmured, "A pleasure, my dear," nearly cracked him up completely. Dancing with Deborah would only be a pleasure for someone with strong masochistic tendencies, and he didn't think the Emperor fell into that category. The Captain wondered briefly whether he should call Luke and ask him to attend Mollari, but then he thought about how Lily would react to being interrupted and changed his mind.*

*The Emperor took him by surprise with his next comment. "You mentioned that your First Officer's child was unwell and that has reminded me of something I meant to ask you. I would very much like to see your son, the little boy in that lovely picture. I know that the child will be asleep by now, but I'm sure we could go and see him without waking him. Is he in your quarters? Could we go there to see him?"*

*Gideon had anticipated some attempt by the Centauri to make their way out of the mess hall and into the main parts of the ship, but he hadn't foreseen this tactic. He glanced quickly at Deborah and could see that she was as surprised as he was. He tried to deflect the request politely. "Our son is in the Medbay crèche with the other children, and I'm afraid that visitors would disturb all of them, particularly if one of Commander Matheson's children is unwell."*

*Mollari wasn't that easily deflected. "Oh, I'm sure we wouldn't disturb them. We needn't take the entire entourage with us," the Emperor gestured at the members of his court, now all dancing, and the guards around the walls. "Just the three of us? You, me and your charming wife?"*

*Gideon didn't want *any* of the Centauri roaming his ship, but was struggling to come up with an excuse when Deborah spoke quietly. "I'm sure if one of the other children is unwell, then Marcus will be awake already." She glanced quickly at Gideon, making it clear that she *knew* that Marcus was awake, by contact through their link. "Rather than disturb the other children, why don't I bring Marcus here?" The Captain knew that she wasn't happy with her own suggestion, but it did provide him with the excuse he needed to prevent Mollari leaving the room.*

*The Emperor started to protest but before he could finish his sentence, Deborah had bobbed a polite curtsy, [which gave the old coot a good look down her cleavage!] Gideon thought, and left the mess hall. Mollari stopped in mid-flow and watched her leave before turning to the Captain.*

*"A small suggestion for you, Captain. If anyone ever asks to dance with your wife again, refuse them," the Emperor said as he turned and limped to a chair, where he sat and rubbed his foot.*



*Gideon looked down at him and tried to keep his face straight as he said, "I did try to warn you, Your*



*Majesty."*

*"Next time, try harder." Mollari let go of his foot and stood again, sighing deeply as he looked at the Captain. "You are a very lucky man, Captain Gideon, but lucky men have a lot to lose. I hear that you like to play poker."*

*Gideon nodded, wondering where Mollari was going with this conversation.*

*The Emperor continued. "In poker, one might say that you have a full house, but remember, a royal flush beats a full house and it is wise to know when it is time to fold."*

*Again, Gideon felt that Mollari was trying to warn him of something. It was almost as if the Emperor was being deliberately obscure, so that someone or something wouldn't understand his references. The Captain nodded and turned the conversation, discussing other card games he had played, while pondering the warning that he was sure he'd just been given.*

*Marcus clung to his mother's neck as she carried him through the ship. He had missed her that day, as she hadn't spent as much time playing with him as she normally did, but the treat of having some of his father's time and attention all to himself had made up for the little boy's disappointment. He knew how busy and important his father was, so treasured the time they spent alone together. Later, both his parents had come to the room he shared with his cousins in the Medbay crèche, to kiss him goodnight and to tuck him into bed. Marcus had breathed in his mother's perfume as she hugged him, thinking how nice she smelled. He'd fallen asleep soon after but had awoken several hours later, feeling uneasy. The child wasn't sure why he felt like that, but he sensed something was wrong. He couldn't pin it down any more closely than that, he just felt... wrong.*

*His mother's appearance in Medbay had come as a great relief to Marcus. He'd been working very hard at not crying about the way he felt, and he hadn't called her through their link, but her being there made him feel safe again. She had lifted him from his bed and held him close, stroking his hair and kissing his forehead as she sent waves of love and security through their link, making Marcus feel much happier. Then his mother told him that she was taking him to see some people. She warned him not to be frightened by their funny appearance, that they couldn't hurt him in any way, as she and his father would both be there all the time.*

*Marcus was a little unhappy at the way his mother described these people. He'd heard people on the Excalibur talking about such people. They were the baddies. He wondered why his mother would be taking him to meet such bad people, but decided that it must be all right if she said it was, and anyway, if his father was going to be there, nothing bad could happen. Marcus knew that his father would always protect him and never allow anything or anyone to harm him. But he clung tightly to his mother's neck anyway.*

*Gideon smiled as Deborah arrived, carrying Marcus in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. The child had his arms held tightly around his mother's neck and was leaning his head on her shoulder, barely peeking out at what was going on around him. The Captain turned to the Emperor and smiled again as he indicated his son. "Your Majesty, this is my son, Marcus." Gideon took a step towards Deborah and laid his hand gently on his son's head. "Marcus, this is the Emperor Mollari. He very much wanted to meet you, so why don't you say hello?"*

*He watched as Marcus turned his head to look at the Centauri Emperor. Instantly the child's face fell and he started to scream. Deborah looked surprised and pulled her son's head back into her shoulder, rocking him gently as he screamed louder and louder. By now the whole room was watching, as Gideon tried simultaneously to comfort his wife and son, while apologizing to the Emperor.*

*"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, he doesn't usually behave like this. Maybe waking up in the middle of the night has upset him, just let me..." Gideon joined Deborah, putting his arms around her, holding their son between them, so he was sheltered from everyone around them. He whispered into his wife's ear. "Take him out of here. I'll get rid of this lot and join you as soon as I can."*

*Gideon stood back to let her go and Marcus turned in his mother's arms. The child's screams had become deafening, and everyone in the room could hear the words that he was yelling over and over again, tears streaming down his face as he stared at the Centauri Emperor in terror. "Bad! The monster's eating him!! Bad, bad, BAD!!!"*

*Deborah fled the room at a run, still hugging Marcus close, with Angel right behind her.*

*Gideon turned back to Mollari and was startled by the look of pain and sorrow he saw on the Emperor's face. As he tried to apologize again, Mollari waved his words away. "It's not important, Captain. As you said, probably a nightmare from waking up in the middle of the night, and that reminds me of the time. We should be leaving."*

*The Centauri court started to bustle around, preparing to leave, as Mollari turned to the Captain again. "Perhaps your son would be less unhappy if he could see the Centauri people in their own homes. I would very much like you and your First Officer to bring your families to join us at my palace on the island of Verani tomorrow. It is a beautiful island, and there are many wonderful things to occupy your families while our negotiations continue. Please, allow me to make up for the distress I unintentionally caused this evening."*

*Gideon tried to get out of it, but Mollari left him no choice. Eventually, the Captain agreed to bring his family down to the planet, subject to Marcus having recovered from his tantrum. [And if you think I'm going to let you within half a planet of my son, then you can think again!] Gideon silently vowed to himself that he would find any excuse not to let the Centauri anywhere near his child, ever again.*

*When Gideon returned to his quarters, he found Deborah and Marcus in his son's bedroom. Deborah still held the little boy as she sat on his bed, rocking him gently, and crooning to him softly. Gideon could see that the child was almost asleep, and could feel the waves of love, calm and security that his wife was projecting. Marcus lifted his head as his father entered the room and twisted in his mother's arms, whimpering, "Daddy," and holding out his arms to his father.*

*Gideon stooped to take the child and held him tightly, pacing the room while he whispered reassurances into Marcus' ear, telling him over and over again that he was safe, nothing was going to hurt him, that they loved him and would never let him come to harm. Deborah sat on the bed watching, still sending the feelings of safety, until eventually Marcus fell asleep in his father's arms.*

*Deborah pulled back the covers and Gideon laid his son gently into bed, watching as his wife tucked Marcus in, Half-Ted beside him, before she bent to kiss the little boy gently on the forehead. As she straightened, Gideon put his arm around Deborah's waist and pulled her close to his side, knowing that*

*despite her composure, she would need his love and reassurance nearly as much as Marcus had. Deborah rarely showed her anxieties and insecurities, but Gideon knew that seeing and feeling her son so badly upset would have been deeply distressing for her. As it was for him.*

*After a few moments spent silently watching Marcus sleep, they left his room and walked back through to their quarters, closing the connecting door behind them, after instructing the computer to monitor Marcus' room and notify them if he woke. When they reached their bedroom, Gideon pulled Deborah into his arms and held her closely, stroking her hair as she rested her head on his shoulder. She didn't speak or cry, but Gideon knew that she was drawing strength and comfort from feeling his arms around her, and the love he always felt for her.*

*Eventually, Deborah raised her head and managed a weak half smile. She whispered, "Thank you," and Gideon didn't need to ask her what she meant.*

*He kissed her gently and smiled back, as he ran his thumb along her cheekbone, asking, "Do you have any idea what caused him to go off like that? Marcus has seen plenty of aliens before and they've never frightened him. What was it about Mollari that set him off?"*

*Deborah shook her head. "I'm not sure. He was incoherent with fear and panic. I've never felt him get like that before, not even when the ship was under attack. He just kept screaming something about a monster and how it was eating the Emperor. I wonder whether he's been watching some movies that he shouldn't, maybe some old horror movies with vampires, because he said something about the monster biting the Emperor's neck." She sighed deeply. "I'd better check the screening program on the computer access. I bet the little horror has found a way round the firewalls I programmed." Deborah tried to laugh but Gideon knew she was still badly shaken by the events of the evening. He kissed her again.*

*"Trust our son to choose the day he meets an Emperor to watch something that gives him nightmares. He must get that deviousness and recklessness from your side of the family. I never behave like that." Gideon watched as Deborah's smile strengthened and she gently punched his arm. He caressed her face again and went on, "There's something else I need to talk to you about, but that can wait until later."*

*Gideon slid his hand across Deborah's shoulder and found the zipper at the back of her dress. Pulling it down slowly, he whispered into her ear, kissing her neck between words, "We may not be as good at dancing as John and Lily, but I once heard someone describe the tango as being all about invading the space between your partner's legs."*

*The Captain pulled his head back and slipped the straps from his wife's shoulders, watching appreciatively as the dress slid to the floor, leaving her naked except for her black stockings. He leaned back and whispered into Deborah's ear, "Let's play Space Invaders."*

*Emperor Mollari slumped into his chair, soaking in the silence of his inner sanctum, the only place in the palace where he could retreat from the courtiers, the guards, the servants, all the people who were supposed to help him, but who only added to his worries and stress. He felt old and tired, and wondered when it would all end. While he had seen his own death in a vision, he didn't know exactly when it would happen. He only hoped that it would be soon.*

*The Emperor sighed deeply. So many choices badly made, so many paths traveled that would have been best left untrodden. So many friends lost, and so few acquired. It sometimes seemed that with each step up the ladder of his career he had become more alone, and now he was at the pinnacle, he had arrived at a*

place of total isolation. Was this what had driven his predecessor mad? Mollari shook his head. Cartagia had been a madman before he became Emperor. He had just hidden it better than most. Insanity wasn't inevitable for the leader of the Centauri, but perhaps sometimes it was preferable, if not for the Republic, then for the Emperor. Maybe if he were mad, the pain the Emperor felt for his planet and his people wouldn't be so severe.

What Mollari wanted more than anything at that moment was to drown himself in Brevari. It helped him forget what was happening around him every day, to forget that in his exalted position, he was no better than a slave. It also had the added benefit of putting his Keeper to sleep. Only when he was drunk was Mollari free. When he was sober, the Keeper would rarely interfere with his words and actions, but when it did, Mollari felt like a stranger in his own body. He would watch himself move and hear words emerge from his mouth over which he had no control. The Keeper controlled everything at those times. The Emperor's greatest fear was that one day his Keeper would take over completely, leaving him a helpless witness to the things his body did and said. He was willing to do almost anything to avoid that.

Pulling himself to his feet, Mollari staggered to the mirror on the far side of the room and pulled his shirt back from his neck. The Keeper squatted there, an obscene growth positioned where his neck joined his right shoulder. As the Emperor watched, the Keeper's single eye opened and glared back at him from the mirror. Mollari shuddered and covered the excrescence quickly. Not that it made any difference. Out of sight was certainly not out of mind in this case, and just because he couldn't see it, didn't mean that the Keeper was not able to see and hear everything he did. At least he'd learned over the years to prevent the damnable thing actually reading his thoughts. Most of the time.

The soft sound of a door sliding back drew Mollari's attention, and he turned to watch a concealed screen opening on the other side of the room, revealing a shadowy figure. The Emperor laughed softly to himself, [Shadowy indeed!]

The figure glided into the room, and as it moved into the light, its true form emerged. No one else in the palace knew of the Drakh that came and went as it pleased, entering the Emperor's inner sanctum through passageways that none knew existed. Mollari sometimes wondered if those passages *had* existed before the Drakh had come and taken over first the Regent, then him, and with them control of the whole Centauri Republic.



The Drakh stood silently for a moment, staring at Mollari but saying nothing. The Centauri knew that his Drakh master was soundlessly communicating with the Keeper that kept him in its thrall, downloading every word and movement that Mollari had made since they had last met. He could keep no secrets from his Keeper or the Drakh, except when he was drunk. Then the Keeper slept, and for a brief time, Mollari was free.

That was why the Emperor had deliberately eluded his guards and courtiers on the day the Excalibur had arrived, drinking enough to knock his Keeper out, so he could make his plea to Captain Gideon to find G'Kar. Since then, his Keeper had been alert and Mollari had not been allowed to drink at either the reception held for the officers of the Excalibur at the palace, or at the party on the ship. Mollari sighed sadly; he would have liked to have tasted more of the fine Brevari the Captain's wife had provided at the party. He smiled quietly to himself, as he waited for the Drakh and Keeper to finish their communing, remembering the party and the beautiful Earth women there. Mollari had particularly enjoyed the dances performed by the First Officer and his charming wife, and dancing

*with the so appropriately named Angel. [An Angel of beauty indeed.]*

*The Emperor sighed again as thoughts of Angel drew him to think of her sister, Captain Gideon's beautiful wife, and of their son. He had asked to see the child solely at the instruction of his Keeper, as a way of escaping the confinement of the reception area in which the party was held. The Keeper had wished to see more of the Excalibur and had sought an excuse. Mollari had been secretly pleased at the Captain's reaction, and how the Keeper had been thwarted by Deborah Gideon's immediately volunteering to bring her son to the party.*

*The child's behavior on arrival was less pleasing. Mollari knew that his Keeper was invisible, except when it chose to be seen. If he had not been sure of that, he would have sworn that Marcus Gideon had been able to see the monster attached to his neck. The Emperor had listened carefully to the Captain's excuses and had tried to convince himself and his Keeper that what the Captain had said was the truth. The child had just awoken from a nightmare and had confused his dreams with reality. Mollari's greatest concern was that his Keeper had believed neither him nor the Captain. His attention was drawn back to the Drakh, as it made the usual hissing sound that emerged whenever it prepared to speak.*

*The voice was deep and rough, full of sibilants and grating noises. Mollari had become somewhat accustomed to it over the years, but it still made him shudder.*

*"Explain to me the meaning of 'Full House'." The 's' in the final word lingered in the air.*

*Mollari froze, remembering his attempt at warning Captain Gideon, but all too aware that while the Keeper could not read his mind, it could tell when his body reacted to stimuli. If the Emperor allowed his reaction to the question to raise his adrenaline levels, or to speed the beat of his hearts, the Drakh would know.*

*"It is a reference to a game that our research indicates Captain Gideon enjoys. I was attempting to build a bond, create some interests in common with him. As you know, humans are more trusting of those who they believe share their interests and concerns."*

*All of which was true, but it masked Mollari's real goal, to warn the Excalibur away from Centauri Prime. He knew that the Drakh wanted to own the ship and its mixture of Vorlon, Human and Minbari technology, and if they couldn't own it, they wanted to annihilate it. To take vengeance for all the Drakh ships destroyed by the Excalibur and her crew, and for the ship's success in defeating the Drakh plague. Mollari knew the Drakh had been sure Earth would die because of that plague, and that Humanity would die with it. They would never forgive the people who had defeated their purpose, and many of those people were now in orbit above Centauri Prime. The Drakh's hatred of the ship was almost palpable. They wanted to take the ship and kill the Captain and crew. Mollari had just one more message to give Gideon, then he wanted the ship away from Centauri Prime as quickly as possible.*

*For the moment, Mollari's response appeared to have been accepted, as the Drakh moved onto another question. "The child appeared able to sense the presence of your Keeper. Explain."*

*The Emperor snorted his amusement. "It would seem that my Keeper is unfamiliar with children and their nightmares. Humans have a deep interest in watching fictional recreations of horrible things. They call them 'Horror movies' and perhaps the child's parents should be more concerned about what their son watches. The boy knew nothing. He was still in the grip of a bad dream." Mollari briefly wished he could say the same, that one day he might wake up from the nightmare he had lived for the past ten years.*

*This time the explanation was not accepted. "We must investigate this matter further. It is essential that the child be taken for examination. Then we shall know the truth." Mollari nodded, secretly hoping that his veiled warnings to the Captain had been sufficient to keep the child safely aboard the Excalibur. Well, as safe as anyone on that ship was, while in orbit over Centauri Prime.*

*The Drakh went on to give the Emperor his instructions for the following day, how the senior officers of the Excalibur and their families were to be greeted and then what actions were to be taken. Mollari's hearts fell with every word.*

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*Gideon lay with his right arm around Deborah's shoulders, as she lay with her head on his chest. His fingers moved lazily, caressing the silky softness of her skin and her hair, silently enjoying the quiet aftermath of their lovemaking. Turning his head slightly, the Captain kissed the top of his wife's head and whispered, "I love you."*

*Deborah turned her head up to look at him and smiled. "I know. You don't have to tell me, but I love it when you do." She turned her head back and kissed his chest, then sighed. "What was it that you wanted to talk to me about? I'm sure it wasn't just to tell me that you love me, although it's such a shock to hear you say it that maybe you should give me fair warning in future."*

*Gideon slid his right arm down his wife's back and slapped her butt gently, reaching over with his left hand to tweak her nipple. As Deborah squirmed against him, reacting by reaching across to pinch his nipple in turn, he smiled and kissed her again. Then he told her about the Emperor's invitation for the following day.*

*Deborah sat up in bed abruptly, and turned to kneel next to Gideon, her face set into a stubborn frown. "Absolutely not! I don't want Marcus anywhere near those people or..."*

*Gideon pressed his fingers to her lips before she could continue. "Calm down. I totally agree. We'll tell the Emperor that the children have some infectious disease and have been put into quarantine. That will help explain Marcus' tantrum and give a reason why they can't travel down to the planet. I'm sure that Luke can come up with something suitably impressive." He paused briefly, hating what he was going to ask next. "But I want you to come down with me anyway, and I want Lily and Angel to come, too."*

*Deborah's expression changed from stubborn to surprised, so Gideon continued. "If I can, I want you sitting next to me at the negotiating table. There's something going on down there that I can't figure out. I'm sure some of the negotiators are lying, but which ones? I need you to tell me." He reached up to caress her face. "I hate asking this, because I hate risking anything happening to you, but this mission is so damned important to the future of the ISA and to the Centauri people, that I have to use every asset I've got." Pulling Deborah's head down to him, he kissed her gently and whispered, "And you are the biggest asset I have in the universe."*

*She laughed softly against his lips. "Be very careful how you say that. If you ever tried to say that I have the biggest ass in the universe, you'd be dead in seconds."*

*Gideon roared with laughter, grabbed his wife and turned her on her back, leaning down to kiss her thoroughly. When he pulled back, he grinned down at her. "You have a beautiful ass. It's fairly big, but it's still beautiful." That earned him another thump on the arm. "Ouch! That's the same place you hit me earlier. Go easy on me, I'm fragile, remember?"*

Deborah smiled up at him, as they both remembered him saying that to her on the first night they had slept together. She reached up to run her fingers through his hair and asked, "So why do you want Angel and Lily to come too? They can't help with the negotiations."

Gideon rolled onto his side and pulled her back into his arms. "I know, but with the three of you there, if anything bad happens you can merge and protect yourselves. The risk that any of you will be hurt is much less if the three of you are together."

Deborah nodded and pulled herself tighter against him, saying, "That makes sense. Marcus is going to be pretty unhappy about me leaving him again, but I can make contact with him through our link and talk to him that way. As long as the ship stays in orbit above the place where we'll be, we should just be in range, although it will be a bit of a stretch."

Gideon looked concerned. "Will it hurt you or him? I hadn't thought of that. Maybe we should rethink..." This time Deborah put her fingers to his lips.

"It will be a little uncomfortable, but it won't really hurt. Marcus will know where I am, and he'll know that you're there, taking care of me. He thinks that you can do anything, so as long as I'm with you, he won't worry. Now, if we're both going to the planet tomorrow, we have to be up early... and no, I didn't mean that." Deborah grinned and tried to swat Gideon's hand as it slid down her back and caressed her butt. She started to say, "Let's try to get some sleep," but her last words were muffled by Gideon's mouth covering hers.

Lily sat bolt upright in bed, startled awake by her dream. She didn't know why her heart was thumping and her pulse racing, as when she thought back on the dream it hadn't really been frightening. So what was it that had made her wake so abruptly?

The redhead closed her eyes and took several deep, calming breaths, then slowly opened them again, to look fondly at her lovers in bed beside her. Just for once Luke had ended up in the middle of the bed. He lay on his back with his head resting on John's shoulder and his right arm sprawled across John's chest. Lily had been snuggled up in Luke's arms before she had awoken with a start. Seeing her lovers' chests rise and fall in a calm rhythm, she slid out of bed and, naked as she was, glided silently into the children's room. She found all three sleeping soundly, and bent down to kiss each of them, stroking their soft hair and sending her love and fondness before she went back into the main bedroom again. For a while, she stood beside the bed and looked down at the two men she adored, thinking how young and vulnerable they looked as they slept, suddenly feeling protective of them. What had provoked that feeling? Lily thought back upon her dream.

All she could recall was an image of Demon, standing rigidly still, dressed in her usual black, her wild tumble of blonde curls cascading down her back. Demon's face had been expressionless, but her arms had been held out in front of her, in a gesture that seemed almost imploring, pleading for... for what? Lily wasn't sure. What she *was* sure about was the white light that came from Demon's open hands, two shafts of light that shot up into the air to join over her head, and a third that linked her two hands, to create a triangle of energy and brightness, through which Lily had seen Demon's impassive face.

Lily suddenly remembered the tears that had rolled down Demon's face as she'd watched, and wondered if that was what had frightened her. Demon rarely let anyone see that she was upset, and she almost never cried in front of her sisters. She always seemed to feel that she had to be strong, to be in control, to be the one who cared for everyone else, seldom allowing anyone other than Matthew to care for her. Lily smiled

*indulgently as she thought about her older 'sister', glad that at last Demon had found one person at least to trust and lean on. She shook her head free of those thoughts and concentrated on her dream again.*

*What was the significance of her vision of Demon and the triangle of light? Something about the power of three? The three sisters who were still together on board the Excalibur? Lily's three children? The ménage a trois in which she lived? Lily wasn't sure; she knew that the dream was a warning of some kind but of what? [Enough of that. It will be revealed in time, as always. I just wish for once I wasn't just a helpless witness, as I was when John was shot, or on Mars, but even then it turned out well, so I'll trust it will this time, too.] With a deep sigh, she slid under the covers again, lay back down and rested her head on Luke's chest, careful not to disturb his sleep, as he needed his rest. Lily smiled a naughty smile. They all needed their rest after what they'd got up to on returning to their quarters after the reception. With those pleasant memories at the forefront of her mind, Lily drifted back into sleep.*

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

{[Part 1: The Centauri Trial](#)}