

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four P - Part 1: The Centauri Trial

by *The Space Witches*



Despite everything that happened, Centauri Prime still has a lot to offer.

Chapter 2

September 2272

Witnesses

Demon could feel the heat as they walked down the ramp of the shuttle and she turned to look at her husband with concern. Sure enough, Matthew was already running his finger under the collar of his dress uniform, looking hot and uncomfortable. Demon suppressed a smile, knowing how much he hated wearing that uniform, and how the tropical heat of the island of Verani would make him sweat and itch even more than usual. She only hoped that he wouldn't start scratching in front of the Emperor, but with Matthew you could never be quite sure.

Glancing at John Matheson, Demon could see that by contrast the Excalibur's XO looked his usual cool, calm, unflappable self. Matthew often moaned that John's dress uniform must have been better tailored and made of a lighter weight material, as John never sweated or itched. Demon knew that in reality John was just more stoical about the discomfort than Matthew. She smiled inwardly, careful not to let any expression show on her face, as she thought that on some subjects Matthew could behave remarkably like



his son. Wearing dress uniform brought out the bad little boy in the Captain but somehow Demon didn't care. She loved the boy in him as much as she loved the man, but the man she loved was beginning to look hot and bothered; not the best start to serious negotiations.

The Excalibur had moved into orbit above the Emperor's island retreat during the night and they had all shuttled down at first light, hoping that the air would be cooler in the early morning. Demon breathed deeply, savoring the scents of fruit

and flowers that wafted on the breeze.

The island was beautiful, like a tropical paradise on Earth with white sandy beaches, green trees, colorful flowers, and a small, beautifully designed palace nestling amongst the trees and lawns. The sea surrounding the island was crystal clear and Demon looked at it longingly, hoping that she'd get an opportunity to swim in it at sometime during the day. She reached out with her mind to touch her son in the ship high above, reassuring him that she and his father would be coming home soon, then she dragged her attention back to the party waiting at the foot of the ramp and followed Matthew down to meet them.

Gideon ran his finger under the collar of his dress uniform, feeling the sweat stand out on his forehead as the heat hit him. He cast an envious glance at his wife, who was wearing a sleeveless, black cotton dress, falling to her ankles, blown back against her body by the breeze coming in from the sea. The Captain knew that underneath the dress Deborah wore a bikini, and that she hoped to get a chance to go swimming later. At that moment, Gideon could think of nothing he would rather do than to take his wife to a quiet beach, strip her dress and the bikini off her, then strip off the god-awful uniform he had to wear and go skinny dipping with her. He sighed deeply and stopped himself scratching at an itch that had developed under his right arm.

The Centauries waiting at the foot of the ramp were looking up at Gideon and his people expectantly, but the Captain found himself reluctant to move. He hated being down on the planet without guards or weapons, but those were the only terms on which the Centauries had allowed them to descend. Unwilling to risk more lives than he had to, Gideon had piloted the shuttle himself, with John acting as co-pilot. They had carefully disabled the controls, using a code key known only to the two of them, before leaving the inside of the shuttle. Now the Centauries couldn't take away their means of escape. [Unless they blow the damned thing up!] Dismissing that thought, Gideon walked down the ramp with Deborah at his side, and John, Luke, Lily, and Angel just behind.

Minister Baronni greeted Gideon and the others politely, looking slightly surprised by the presence of Luke Raven, and the absence of the children. The Minister bowed as he kissed Lily's hand, then Angel's, finally turning to Gideon and saying, "But where are your delightful children? The Emperor will be very disappointed that you have not brought them. He has gone to great trouble to arrange entertainment for them."

The Captain smiled apologetically, and explained how they had discovered that all of the children had succumbed to an infectious disease. "It's called 'chickenpox', and while it's not too serious for children, it's extremely infectious and very unpleasant for adults. Fortunately, we have all experienced the disease as children, and are therefore immune. We don't *think* the disease can jump species, but we were unwilling to take any risks with the health of the Emperor."

Gideon went on to describe in detail the places on the body where the spots associated with the disease could break out and how badly they itched, watching Baronni pale as he continued, "I thought it best to bring our ship's doctor down with us today. It's very unlikely that any of you could have picked up the infection during the brief time my son was in the room with you, but I thought it might reassure you to have our doctor's input and expertise available, should any of you start to display any symptoms."

Baronni murmured, "Symptoms?" looking more worried all the time.

Gideon used his best poker face. "Itching is usually the first sign. You don't have any itches do you, Minister?" He knew very well that just saying the words would make Baronni's skin prickle. The Minister was in for an uncomfortable day, but was obviously determined not to express his concerns, as he dismissed the need for Raven's assistance and said that the doctor could spend the day relaxing in the gardens with the ladies.

[Here we go...] Gideon tried to persuade Baronni to allow Deborah to sit in on the negotiations, saying that his wife had specialized knowledge of Earth history and current ISA treaties, which would be extremely helpful to the negotiations. This was true. Deborah had a voracious appetite for reading and spent much of her time on the Excalibur absorbing what appeared to be the entire contents of the Earth Alliance history files, plus a few centuries of the histories of the major ISA races. She constantly surprised Gideon with the depth of her knowledge about events that had occurred while she was in stasis. [Then again, Deborah doesn't have a ship to run and fifteen million bureaucrats to satisfy--just one sometimes-cranky Captain--so she gets the time to read.]

Baronni wouldn't budge. He refused point blank to have Deborah added to the negotiating team, saying that only Gideon and Matheson had been accredited as President Sheridan's representatives.

Gideon sighed and conceded the point, turning to his wife and kissing her goodbye as he whispered into her ear, "It was worth a try, and maybe you'll get a chance to swim. Stay close to your sisters, and call me on the commlink if you need me."

He pulled back and looked Deborah straight in the eye. They had discussed what to do in this eventuality, and Gideon knew that she would fight her way through every Centauri guard on the island if she really needed to get to him. He just hoped that wouldn't be necessary. The Captain hated leaving the women with only Raven to stay with them, but he told himself that they were more than capable of protecting themselves against anything the Centauri could throw at them, short of an atomic bomb, and even then he wouldn't want to give odds on the outcome. Luke Raven would be more likely to benefit from their protection than vice versa.

With one final kiss for Deborah, Gideon accompanied Matheson into the palace, leaving his wife, her sisters and the doctor outside.

Angel smiled as Ursa Baronni joined the group still standing at the foot of the ramp and offered her his arm. From the moment she had first seen the handsome Centauri, Angel had been attracted to him. He was tall and slim, with an athletic build, and the tight pants that Centauri fashion demanded for men accentuated his slender hips and tight buttocks. Ursa's waist was narrow and his shoulders broad. Even his hair didn't look too strange as he wore a very short crest. Angel was strongly reminded of a 20th century movie star, but she couldn't quite remember his name. [Patrick something, I think. He was a good dancer, too.]

When they had first danced together, Angel had been completely swept away by Ursa's grace and style. He had led firmly and danced divinely, and Angel had felt heat spreading throughout her body from where the palm of his hand was placed firmly in the center of her back. They had danced close and slow, her breasts rubbing against his chest, arousing her further, making her want him, all of him, deep inside her.

But Ursa wasn't human. Angel had raced to the Medbay computer, checking the anatomy files on the Centauri, her eyes growing larger and rounder, her nipples stiffening as she read. Six? They had SIX?! Angel's breath had come in hot little pants. She had tried to imagine what sex with a Centauri would be like. It had been a couple of months since she had slept with a man, and her mind swept her back to her encounter with Mal Fillion, when she had last felt strong arms around her, hot lips on her mouth and body, a hard cock thrusting into her...Angel had quickly closed the computer files and wished she could take a cold shower.

Now the gorgeous Centauri was by Angel's side, being incredibly attentive, making her laugh, as he showed her and her sisters around the palace gardens. Ursa and Angel dawdled along the sinuous paths, allowing Demon, Lily, Raven, and the other Centauries to draw away from them. Ursa stopped at a tree and plucked a ripe fruit from a hanging branch, offering it to Angel to bite into.

"It's quite safe. I checked which fruits were compatible with human body chemistry. Here." He offered it but didn't let go, when Angel placed her hand over his. Holding it to her mouth, he watched as she bit into it and laughed as the juices ran down her chin. Angel shivered as Ursa ran his finger down her throat, following the line of the juice. Then he leaned forward and licked the juices from her neck. The feeling of his lips against her throat, of his tongue working its way up to her chin, set Angel afire. She found that she wanted this man, this Centauri, as she had wanted no other man since... She pushed those thoughts and memories away, concentrating on the pleasure Ursa's mouth was giving her. He pulled her into his arms, and his hands started to wander over her body, creating heat in every place he touched.

Angel was losing herself in the pleasure of it all, when she was brought back to the present by Demon's voice, calling from further up the path. "Angel? Where are you?"

Ursa quickly released Angel from his arms, and by the time Demon appeared around a twist in the trail, the two of them were standing, innocently examining one of the fruits from the tree. Angel smiled cheerily at her sister, while inwardly cursing her. "Hello. Ursa was just showing me some of the local fruits. You should try some." She held the fruit out to Demon.

Angel knew that she wasn't fooling Demon at all, and that her sister knew perfectly well what she had interrupted. Demon may not have been able to read Angel's feelings, but if Ursa were anywhere near as aroused as Angel, Demon would have been able to read him from the other side of the island.

Demon smiled sweetly and looked from Angel to Ursa and back. "The trouble with tasting fruit in the Garden of Eden is that there always seems to be a snake in the grass nearby. The difficulty can be in recognizing the snake when you see him."

Ursa looked confused, but Angel understood exactly what Demon was getting at. She smiled back at her sister. "Don't worry, I've had enough experience with snakes to last me a lifetime. I think I can spot one when I see one."

Demon nodded and turned away. As Angel and Ursa followed, the Centauri turned to Angel and asked,

"What's a snake?"

Angel decided that Ursa needed a lesson in biology. She just had to work out a way to give him some private tuition.

Matheson followed his Captain and the Centauri Minister into the palace. It reminded him of pictures he'd seen of a palace on Earth, in the city of Istanbul. The name eluded him for a moment, but then he remembered. Topkapi. The Centauri palace had similar cool ceramic tiles, with geometric and floral designs in vibrant colors. There were open fretwork screens at the windows, which shielded the rooms from the sun, while allowing the cool sea breezes into the interior. A maze of passageways led from one room into the next. Matheson smiled as he remembered that some of the pictures he had seen had been of the harem in the Sultan's palace. He wondered if these rooms in the Centauri Emperor's retreat had the same function.

Baronni led them onto a large balcony, screened from the sun by a billowing canopy above their heads and surrounded on three sides by intricately carved screens, through which a gentle breeze carried scents from the gardens. Cushions were scattered around in heaps, and a low table was set to one side, laid out with golden flasks and cups, and golden plates of finger foods. Matheson and Gideon were invited to relax on the cushions, while they took refreshments.

John lowered himself carefully onto the soft pillows, finding it hard to sit upright as they gave way beneath him. He saw that his Captain was having the same problem, and Gideon was shifting uncomfortably, trying to find a position in which he could remain reasonably vertical. It wasn't easy. John suppressed a smile at the sight of Gideon struggling to sit upright.

Baronni dismissed the other Centauries and clapped his hands. The curtains covering the exit from the balcony lifted and a young Centauri woman entered, kneeling in front of them while she served their drinks. Matheson tried hard not to stare at her, but he found it extremely difficult. A quick glance at Gideon showed that the Captain was equally captivated.

The Centauri woman was tiny, not much taller than Lily, but with a body clearly that of a grown woman, and dressed to display every curve and line. She was completely covered from neck to ankle, but the fabric she wore was translucent, shimmering in the light that found its way through the screens, revealing different parts of her body as she moved, then concealing them again.

As she kneeled at their feet and poured their drinks, the movement of her arm was enough to display her firm, heavy breasts, then the view was hidden again as she placed the flask back on the table. She leaned forward to place their cups in front of them, and the fabrics shifted again, this time clearly displaying her belly and thighs. John found himself almost mesmerized by the shifting patterns of material and flesh. Somehow the woman's head, hairless except for the thick, lustrous wave of dark hair falling in a pony-tail down her spine, made her look even more naked and desirable. As she finished pouring their drinks, she raised her eyes and John saw that they were huge, dark and almond shaped. The woman's face was as beautiful as her body.

Minister Baronni clapped his hands again, and music sounded from behind the curtains. The woman rose to her feet and started to dance. Her movements were sinuous and sexy, and John couldn't help but be reminded of when Lily had danced for him and Luke. That memory brought him to his senses. Lily's dance made this woman look clumsy and amateurish.

John shook his head, becoming aware that the perfumes pervading the balcony were now much stronger. He sniffed carefully and realized what was happening. The Centauri were pumping pheromones into the semi-enclosed space, designed to arouse the human males. John had no doubt that their food and drinks were laced with aphrodisiacs, too.

Turning his head, Matheson saw that Gideon was staring at the dancing girl, his mouth open, obviously entranced. The XO leaned across and gently shook his Captain's arm, whispering, "Captain... Matthew... look at me."

Gideon turned to face his XO, but his eyes were glazed, and John wondered if he were conscious of anything other than the dance, the music and the scents surrounding them. Matheson did the only thing he could think of to capture his Captain's attention. He sent a sharp thought into Gideon's mind, the mental equivalent of a slap in the face.

Gideon blinked and shook his head, then focused on his XO. He growled, "Let's get out of here," and pushed himself to his feet, struggling out of the grasp of the soft cushions. John followed his lead, and the two of them stood, looking down at Baronne, as he lounged against the pillows. The music continued and the woman still danced, but now she slid herself between the two humans, pressing her body against them as she moved. John saw the look of distaste on his Captain's face, as he glared at the Centauri Minister.

"I thought we were here to negotiate a peace agreement. Where is Emperor Mollari?"

Baronne leaned back into the cushions and smiled lazily. "The Emperor is indisposed and may not be available until this evening. I thought you might enjoy being...entertained while we waited for him."

Gideon growled back, "You thought wrong. I lost interest in this sort of entertainment soon after puberty. Although it's always educational to see another planet's version of a brothel and a whore."

The dancing girl hissed at the last words and threw herself at the Captain, hands reaching out to claw him with her nails. John grabbed the girl's arms before she could get to Gideon, holding her off as she tried to scratch and bite him, while his Captain continued speaking to the Centauri.

"These talks are important enough to the ISA for me to ignore the insult you just paid me and my First Officer in assuming that we would indulge ourselves in your cheap hospitality. We're prepared to wait until the Emperor recovers from his 'indisposition', but we'll wait with our wives."

As the Captain spoke, Baronne struggled to his feet, giving John the perfect opportunity to thrust the wildcat he was holding into the Minister's arms, as he and Gideon turned and stormed off the balcony. John smiled to himself as he followed his Captain out, thinking, [Looks like I was right about this place, after all.]

Gideon was muttering, "No wonder they wouldn't let me bring Deborah in with me!" as he swept past the startled guards on their way out.

Baronne threw the dancing girl onto the cushions and turned as a hidden panel slid open, and his Emperor stepped through onto the balcony. The Minister saw that Mollari's face was cold and frozen, a look he associated with the Emperor's very worst moods. Since working with Mollari, the Minister had become aware that the Emperor underwent major mood swings, being kind and indulgent at one moment, and vicious at the next. He dreaded the next few moments, barely aware of the dancing girl fleeing from the

room.

Mollari spoke softly. "So your plan failed. I expected it would. The humans are not stupid, you know."

Baronni nodded acknowledgment of his failure and asked, "Is the party in the garden having any greater success, Your Majesty?" He hoped that the answer would be 'No'.

The Emperor sighed. "The wives of the Captain and First Officer are being difficult. They are staying close to each other and to the ship's doctor. They are not giving us much opportunity. However, their sister--the delightful Angel--is proving more amenable."

The words that followed were spoken softly, but accompanied by a malicious smile that made Baronni's blood curdle. "It seems that young Ursa may succeed where you have failed, Minister Baronni. I shall remember that your nephew has served me better than you have."

The Minister froze in place as the Emperor turned and left the balcony. He then sighed, and at last, allowed himself to scratch at the itch that had been annoying him ever since the Captain had described the symptoms of 'chickenpox'. He decided to visit the palace doctor. Just in case.

Gideon stormed out of the palace, furious with the Centauri for trying such an obvious ploy and furious with himself for nearly falling for it. If John hadn't snapped him out of it, would he have betrayed Deborah for the sake of a cheap whore? Would his body have overridden his brain enough to do that? Gideon feared that it might. He could recall occasions with Angel when that had happened.

A flustered Centauri courtier tried to block his path, and Gideon snarled a demand that they find the rest of his party NOW! The look on the Captain's face was obviously enough for his demands to be taken seriously, as within seconds, he and John were being escorted through the palace gardens and down to a beach.

When they arrived there, the view itself was enough to start calming the Captain. Green lawns and trees led down to clean white sands, which fell away into sparkling blue water. A crystal clear stream trickled over rocks, across the beach and into the sea. Pavilion-like white tents were dotted randomly along the shore, all decorated with colorful flags that fluttered in the cool breeze blowing in across the water. For a moment, Gideon regretted not bringing Marcus down with them. His son would have loved to play on this beach with his parents, and Gideon would have loved to play there with his wife and son. He shook his head and told himself that the beauty concealed dangers to which he was not willing to expose his son. It was bad enough that his wife and her sisters were at risk.

At that moment, Deborah appeared from inside one of the pavilions, almost as if summoned by Gideon's thoughts. He watched as she walked up the beach toward him, still wearing her long black dress, her pale golden hair flowing down her back, holding her hands out to him and smiling as she walked. Lily and Luke walked next to her, looking intently at John as they joined him.

Gideon realized that John must have sent a telepathic message to his lovers, and they were expected. Deborah put her arms around Gideon's neck and kissed his cheek, whispering, "It's OK. John told Lily and Luke what happened, and they told me. There's nothing to feel bad about." The Captain hugged her tightly, burying his face in her hair, glad for once that Deborah had picked up on his guilty feelings, and that he hadn't had to tell her anything.

After a few moments, he lifted his head and turned to the Centauri courtier who had escorted them, asking for some privacy. The courtier bobbed a bow and hurried off, leaving the five humans standing together at the top of the beach. Gideon looked around and asked, "Where's Angel?"

Deborah smiled as she replied, "In the pavilion, with Ursa."

They started walking back down the beach together, Gideon gripping Deborah's hand tightly, wanting and needing to feel her next to him. He longed to pull off his boots and walk barefoot in the sand, to strip off the hot dress uniform and spend a little time with his wife on the beautiful beach.

*As they arrived at the pavilion, Ursa emerged, smiling apologetically. Angel was a step behind, and Gideon could see that her hair was tangled and her face flushed. No doubt she and Ursa had taken advantage of their few moments alone together. The Captain wasn't sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, it was useful to have Angel get information from Ursa that would otherwise be unavailable to them, but on the other he hated feeling he was using her in that way. Gideon was also concerned about what the Centauri's motives in pursuing Angel might be. He reminded himself that Angel was a beautiful woman, and that would be reason enough for any man to court her, but the dangers of their current circumstances made him wary. Gideon told himself that what he felt was *not* jealousy. Not at all.*

Ursa spoke hurriedly, saying that his uncle had called and asked him to apologize for the misunderstanding at the palace. Gideon snorted to himself, [Yeah, someone misunderstood something all right!] Ursa went on to explain that, as the Emperor would probably not be available until the evening, [Having another allergic reaction is he?] Minister Baronni hoped that the party from the Excalibur could enjoy their day, relaxing and using the facilities available to them. As Ursa spoke, he waved his arm to indicate a group of Centauries who were now coming down the beach toward them, laden with baskets.

Ursa continued, "Each of the pavilions along the beach is prepared for your comfort. Please feel free to use any of them." He turned to take something from a Centauri servant who had moved to stand next to him, then offered it to the Captain. "My uncle was concerned that you and the Commander could not relax and be comfortable in your uniforms, so he sent these as a gift."

Gideon took the item offered, which turned out to be a long, black silk robe. The material was soft and fine, and the Captain knew that it would be cool and comfortable, everything his dress uniform wasn't. He thanked Ursa and watched as John was offered a similar robe, and the servants started to unpack the contents of their baskets. Within moments, trays had been laid out within the pavilion, holding drinks and fruits, exotic foods of every kind, all spread out in front of colorful piles of cushions. Luke surreptitiously ran a medical scanner over the food and drink, and nodded to Gideon, indicating that it was free from contamination or drugs.

"The servants can stay to help you if you wish, or I can dismiss them if you prefer?" Ursa raised a questioning eyebrow, and Gideon asked him to let the servants go. The Centauri nodded and gave his orders, then turned to Angel, telling her how much he regretted being unable to spend the day with her, but as the Captain preferred his party to be alone, he would go back to the palace.



Gideon watched as Angel's face fell and her eyes filled with tears. She had obviously been looking forward to spending the day with Ursa. The Captain sighed and relented. "It's OK, Ursa, please stay. We're just not used to having servants around, that's all. I didn't mean that you should go." The smile that lit up Angel's face rewarded Gideon for his decision.

He sighed again and turned to the others, "Looks like we're stuck here for the day, so we may as well make the most of it. Deborah and I will be down in the next pavilion." Gideon wanted to warn them of the possible dangers of the place, but was constrained by Ursa's presence. He restricted himself to a general caution. "Stay close together, and don't leave the beach without letting me know."

The Captain led his wife out of the pavilion, holding her hand tightly. He slung the robe over his shoulder and grabbed a flask of wine with his free hand as he left, pausing as Deborah stooped and picked up two cups. Gideon could hardly wait to get to the privacy of the next pavilion to strip himself out of his uniform. Of course, having done so, he might decide not to put the robe on immediately...

As soon as they were inside the pavilion, Demon dropped the cups to the floor and turned to unfasten her husband's jacket, pushing it off his shoulders as he kissed her. She managed to get him undressed between kisses, but his wandering hands kept distracting her and she eventually pushed him away with a smile. "Behave! We may be out of sight of the others, but if you make me scream, the whole island will hear."

Matthew pulled her back into his arms and kissed her neck, murmuring, "I like to make you scream. You look beautiful when your face is flushed, sweat is dripping from your breasts, and you're screaming my name." Demon felt her breathing accelerate and heat growing inside her.

"Stop it! We can't do it here! If you make me come, everyone will find out what I am."

Her husband paused and leaned back. "Hell. You're right. This is typical, I get to be alone with you on a tropical island, with sun, sand and sea all around, and I can't make love to you. Life really is a bitch sometimes."

Demon smiled and kissed him gently. "You know there are *other* ways we can have fun. We don't have to have sex *all* the time."

Matthew looked surprised. "There are? We don't? Damned if I can think of anything right now."

The tall blonde stripped off her dress, revealing the bikini she wore underneath, and turned to the open front of the pavilion. As she reached the opening, she looked back over her shoulder at her husband, who was now totally naked, and semi-erect. "Race you to the sea. It should be cold enough to solve your little problem."

Demon nodded at his stiffening shaft and grinned, then ran for the water, knowing from the sound of his voice that Matthew was only a few steps behind her, yelling, "Little?! I'll show you little..."

Gideon looked down at himself as he stood inside the pavilion. "I look like I'm wearing a dress." Deborah giggled as she lay back, naked on the cushions, watching him.

"Don't be silly. You look like a dashing Arab Prince, who's going to sweep me up into his arms and carry me off into the desert on the back of his magnificent stallion."

The Captain grinned at his wife. "It will have to be a Clydesdale, if it's going to carry your weight." He ducked as she threw a pillow at him, then dropped to his knees at her side and lifted her hand to kiss it.

They had played in the sea together until the sun got too high in the sky, making the heat and glare uncomfortable; then they had retreated to the pavilion. The interior was shady, and the breeze blowing in from the sea kept the air inside cool. Gideon had helped Deborah out of her wet bikini and helped to dry her hair, then he had dressed himself in the robe that the Centauri had given him. With no mirrors, he couldn't really see how he looked, but he now decided he didn't really care. The robe was cool and comfortable, and his uniform was neither.

Gideon moved his lips from Deborah's hand up her arm, to her shoulder, then started kissing her neck, while running his hands over her breasts and thighs. He felt her move beneath his hands, becoming more aroused, putting her arms around his shoulders and pulling him down on top of her. He moved his mouth to cover hers and started kissing her passionately, knowing he shouldn't, knowing he should stop, but unable to prevent himself. After a few moments, Deborah arched her back and rolled Gideon over, until he was lying prone, with her sitting astride him. He looked up into her face as she licked her lips, swollen from their kisses, then she dropped her mouth to his ear, whispering, "There's no need for both of us to suffer."

Deborah slid down his legs, and freed his robe from where it was trapped between them, lifting it to expose his erection. As she flipped the robe back over Gideon's chest, she grinned up at him. "This is handy. I think you'll have to wear one of these at home." Before Gideon could reply, she lowered her head to his swollen cock and took it into her mouth.

Gideon groaned with pleasure as Deborah used her mouth, her fingers, her tongue, her lips, even her hair, to lift him to a state of almost painful arousal. But she always pulled back when she sensed that he was about to come, blowing on him gently to bring him back from the brink, then starting again. The Captain buried his hands in her hair, gripping tightly, trying hard not to pull on it, but getting more desperate by the minute for her to finish him off. Finally, his restraint broke and he pulled his wife's head away, grabbing her arms and pulling her up to his chest.

He rolled over and pinned her beneath him, glaring down at her. "This is what you get for teasing." Before Deborah could move or struggle, Gideon thrust into her, entering her tight vagina almost roughly, but feeling her heat and moisture easing his passage with each hard thrust.

Deborah cried out as he built up the pace, "Oh god, Matthew! Stop... please... you mustn't... I can't!"

Gideon buried his face in her hair and whispered into her ear. "Just once. Once is OK. The Centauri won't know what it is. Let it happen." He could feel Deborah's vagina pulsing around his hard cock as she approached orgasm, and he let himself come with her as she screamed his name, wave after wave of pleasure coursing through them until he collapsed, heaving for breath, on top of her.

Demon lay with her head on Matthew's chest, her body curled around his, while he stroked her hair and played with her breasts. The only sounds came from the sea washing against the shore and the birds circling in the sky. The gentle breeze and soothing sounds were lulling them both to sleep when Demon picked up a stray feeling.

The tall blonde sat upright abruptly, cocking her head to one side, almost trying to 'hear' the emotion that had captured her attention.

"What's the matter?"

Demon turned to answer her husband's question, frowning at him as he lay back in the cushions on the floor of the pavilion, watching her. "Something. I don't know what. It's right at the edge of my perception, but someone on this island is...hating. That's the only word that describes it. Someone is feeling a great hatred for something." Demon shook her head. "It's gone now. It's been doing that all day. The feeling comes and goes."

Matthew looked up at her with concern. "Do you have any idea where it's coming from? Who it is?"

Demon shook her head, saying, "I can't pin it down. I wonder if John has picked it up. He might be better at homing in on it than I am."

Matthew leaped to his feet and pulled her up to join him, grabbing her dress and giving it to her, before picking up his own robe and pulling it over his head. "Let's go find out." He grinned at Demon as she pulled her dress on. "You'd better let Lily know that we're on our way. We don't want to interrupt anything."

Gideon grinned at the sight awaiting them when they entered the tent where John, Luke and Lily had remained. John was stretched out on the cushions wearing the black robe that he had been given. Lily lay across him, her head in his lap, while Luke sat next to her, holding a large cushion down over her thighs and belly, as she giggled. The cushion was the only thing covering Lily's naked body, other than her hair. The rampant red locks cascaded over her shoulders, covering her breasts, but allowing a nipple just to peek out when she wriggled, trying to escape Luke, who was holding her down.

John grinned up at his Captain as he and Deborah entered the tent. "She refused to put any clothes on, so Luke is trying to keep her decent."

Gideon grinned, remembering the night when he had seen everything there was to see of Lily's tiny, perfect body. "Don't go to any trouble on my account." That earned him an elbow in the ribs from Deborah.

Lily escaped from Luke's clutches, and Gideon caught a glimpse of her slender, creamy white legs and tiny ass as she threw herself across the tent, sweeping up her green silk sun dress from the floor and slipping it over her head in one swift, graceful motion. She turned and stuck her tongue out at her lovers, saying, "Spoilsports!" as she scrambled back over the cushions and landed in John's arms.

Gideon watched as Matheson hugged Lily tightly, kissing her briefly but passionately, before turning his attention to the couple standing in the opening of the tent. The Captain remembered how John had been before Lily and Luke joined him on the Excalibur, reserved to the point of shyness, quiet, diligent, but lonely. Since being joined by his family, the smiles that had previously been so rare now appeared to be an almost permanent fixture on John's face. Gideon knew that his First Officer and friend had never been happier.

One of those smiles was now plastered across John's face as he looked up at Gideon. "What can we do for you? Lily said you wanted to talk to me about something." He waved Gideon and Deborah down to join

them on the cushions, while Luke gathered cups together and poured everyone a drink.

Deborah explained the feeling she had picked up and asked John about it. He nodded as she spoke, then said. "Yes, I've been feeling it too, but I can't pin it down either. I'd have to do a detailed scan for that, and before you ask, Matthew, the answer is 'no'. I'm not allowed to do that. You know the rules."

Gideon sighed. He sometimes wished that his First Officer weren't so honorable and law abiding. John didn't have to worry about the Joneses any more, Gideon had seen to that, so why couldn't he... The Captain stopped himself in his tracks. He knew the answer to that question. John couldn't break the rules because he was John. Too honorable, too loyal, too concerned about the telepaths who followed in his footsteps to ever put his position and theirs in jeopardy. All the qualities that Gideon admired, that made John the best XO he'd ever had, and also made John his friend.

He sat in silence for a while, brooding quietly, when he became aware of an absence. "Where's Angel?" Gideon realized that he was repeating himself. It was the same question he'd asked earlier, and the answer was almost identical.

"In one of the other pavilions, with Ursa." Lily smiled as she spoke, happy for her sister.

The Captain turned to Deborah. "Can you check that she's OK? I don't like her being on her own."

Deborah smiled at him and leaned forward to kiss him gently. "If she were on her own, you wouldn't worry so much. It's the company she's keeping that bothers you."

Gideon decided he never wanted his wife to know how true her statement was.

Demon closed her eyes and sent, [//Angel? Are you all right, darling? Matthew is worried.//]

Angel's mental laugh sounded in Demon's head. [//Tell the Captain to stop being such a worrywart. I'm fine. In fact, I'm just wonderful! Oh, Demon, you have no idea!//] Demon's mind was flooded with words and images, as Angel sent graphic details of how she had spent the last few hours with Ursa. Demon learned more about Centauri six in those few moments than she had ever really wanted to know.

Demon could feel herself blushing as she mentally yelled, [//Stop! You're drowning me, Angel!//] and shook her head to clear it of the erotic images Angel had been sending.

A mental giggle made its way into her head. [//Oops! Sorry, I didn't mean to shout.//]

Demon sent back a soft laugh, [//That's OK, but maybe you'd better wait until we can talk before you give me all the details.//] She paused and gritted her teeth, determined to make Angel listen to her next thoughts, no matter how unpalatable they might be. [//Angel, please be careful. We won't be staying here on Centauri Prime forever, and all too soon you and Ursa are going to have to say goodbye.//]

Angel blew a mental kiss to her sister. [//I know, don't worry. I'm deeply in lust with Ursa, not in love. Just let me have a little fun.//]

Demon smiled indulgently. It wasn't often that her sister got to have fun. She sent back, [//All right, but be careful in another way, too. There's something not quite right with this place and these people. I know that you trust Ursa, but still...//] Demon trailed off, unable to verbalize her concerns.

This time Angel sent a mental hug. [Don't worry, Demon, I can take care of myself. I have my powers remember? If Ursa tries to do anything I don't want to do, I'll throw him from one end of the beach to the other. Now go off and play with Matthew again.] Angel giggled through the link, [like you did earlier. Ursa wondered what was happening when you came. It certainly stimulated him though. Hmm, I'd better go, he's just started to... ooohhh...]

Angel's thoughts disintegrated into a jumble of lust, and Demon broke the link. She focused back inside the tent and became aware that Matthew was watching her closely. "Well?" he asked.

Demon leaned forward and kissed him tenderly. "She's fine. Now, let's go for another swim. Then maybe we can nap for a while. I'm sure that Lily, Luke and John have things they'd rather do than chat with us."

With a suggestive smile at her sister and her sister's lovers, Demon pulled Matthew to his feet and dragged him out of the tent.

As they disappeared from the tent, Demon heard Lily call after them, "Hold on, we'll join you!"

Lily was floating on her back, eyes closed, rocked softly by the gentle waves, while John and Luke were kneeling either side of her in the shallow water, holding her hands. "I really hope the Centauri will rejoin the ISA, so we can come back on vacation here," Lily said with a contented smile. "I do miss the pool, and my bathtub."

Demon voiced her agreement from where she was treading water next to Matthew, a bit farther out. "Only the waterfall is missing, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were one in another part of the island."

"Oh yes, the waterfall." Lily opened her eyes and grinned at Luke lasciviously as she remembered their lovemaking under the waterfall during the Excalibur's second visit to Eriadne, almost succeeding in making him blush. [Rats,] she thought with amusement, [He looks so sweet when he blushes.]

"Hey, that's not very lady-like," John said with a grin, and before Lily could answer, Gideon did.

"They're not ladies, John, they're witches."

"That's right," Demon said, giving Matthew a peck on the cheek, "and this witch needs a nap right now."

Lily sighed and rotated into a vertical position, flexing her legs so she could kneel on the sand. "I'm afraid so. I'm not used to being out in the open air for this long."

"Well, as your physician, I have to tell you that you shouldn't strain your body too much," Luke said, and suddenly Lily found herself grabbed and lifted out of the water by her lovers. She quickly threw her arms around their necks, squealing with delight.

"You'll excuse us? We have to put a witch to bed." Luke grinned at Matthew and Demon, and as John and he carried Lily towards their tent, the tiny redhead waved back.

"Have a good nap!"

Gideon chuckled as he watched his XO and doctor retreat with their lover, then gave his wife a wistful smile. "Don't expect me to carry you like that, unless you want me to break my back."

Deborah grinned. "Too bad I forgot to bring my broomstick; it could have carried both of us."

"What? I thought you were afraid of heights!"

"Oh, you know how much I like to get something long and hard between my legs," Deborah gave him a naughty grin, then grabbed Gideon's hand and pulled him up with her. "Let's go get some rest. You may need it for the talks later."

Prosecution

Angel lay back in Ursa's arms, feeling more relaxed and satisfied than she had in years. When they had left Lily, Luke and John, and come to this lovely tent to find some privacy, Ursa had slowly removed every item of her clothing, kissing and caressing her as he did so. By the time she stood naked before him, Angel had been ablaze with lust and desire.



Ursa had lowered her gently to the pillows, then examined her body closely, finding out what she enjoyed and what aroused her. Eventually he had laid Angel on her stomach and carefully examined her back, kissing his way down her spine, his hands fondling her buttocks. Angel had lain with her head resting on her hands, her eyes closed, lost in pleasure, when she had felt him move away.

Opening her eyes briefly, she had looked over her shoulder and saw that Ursa had taken off his shirt. His broad chest had a fine covering of hair, and she had seen some diamond shaped... things resting against his ribs. Before she could examine them more closely, Ursa had leaned forward and

kissed her gently, telling her to close her eyes.

Angel had done so and had felt his hands moving over her buttocks again, and his mouth kissing the nape of her neck, where he had pulled her hair aside. Then she had felt something sliding between her legs. It was warm and supple, and worked its way along her labia, stroking her softly as she lay quietly moaning at the sensations she was feeling. Angel had moved her legs slightly apart, giving whatever it was better access to her. Then another... something joined the first, sliding into her as the first found her clitoris and started gently massaging her already swollen nub.

Over the next few hours, Ursa had brought Angel to heights of pleasure that she had only experienced with one other man. As she lay in Ursa's arms, Angel allowed herself to remember the months she had spent with Lucas. He may not have had six, but with his hands, his mouth, his skill, his imagination and his large *one*, he had given Angel more pleasure than she had ever thought possible.

Angel smiled sadly to herself, knowing that much of that pleasure had come from her loving Lucas, in a way that she could never love Ursa. Demon's warnings had truly been unnecessary; Angel could never fall

in love with this handsome Centauri. Ursa may have won her body and her affection, but he could never win her heart. That had been lost long ago and had never been recovered. Looking out of the open front of the pavilion, down the white beach to the blue sea, Angel sighed deeply. This place would truly have been paradise if it were Lucas' arms that surrounded her and Lucas' chest on which she laid her head.

Ursa must have heard her sigh, as he kissed the top of her head gently and murmured, "Are you comfortable? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Angel couldn't remember ever having been with a man who had so devoted himself to her comfort and pleasure. "I'm very comfortable, if a little warm. I don't suppose you can turn the sun down a bit to make it cooler, can you?" She looked up at him and gave him a teasing smile.

Ursa kissed her mouth then pulled back and smiled. "I haven't mastered that one yet, although I would fly to the pole to get ice for you, if you asked." The look of total devotion on his face made Angel smile as he continued, "But it will be much cooler in the palace. I have a room there that you'd enjoy. The screens shield it from the sun, while allowing the breeze to cool it. I have silk and satin pillows for you to lie on, much more comfortable than this old thing." He plucked at the rich blue rug on which they lay in disdain. "I have ice cold drinks, and frozen fruits to cool your pretty mouth." Ursa leaned forward and started to whisper about the other places on Angel's body he would soothe with ice cubes, causing her temperature to rise even higher.

Angel shook her head, regretfully. "The Captain said we should stay on the beach. I shouldn't..."

Ursa caressed Angel's cheek then kissed her again. "He needn't know. We can sneak away for an hour or so, and no one will know we've gone."

Angel thought about it. She tentatively reached out through her link to her sisters, finding that they were both asleep. Ursa was right, no one would ever know and she was feeling rather warm. His whispered description of his bathroom, with a mosaic-tiled tub large enough to swim in, filled with cool, perfumed water was so tempting... Angel made up her mind. She would go with Ursa. She could trust him to take care of her.

Ursa's rooms were everything he had promised; cool and shady, beautifully decorated with swathes of silk, the floor littered with sumptuous cushions, and a huge bed, covered by red satin sheets. Ursa led Angel to his bathroom, where they played in the cool, deep pool of water, splashing each other, touching, caressing, kissing, until Angel felt as if she were on fire with passion again. Ursa carried her back into his bedroom, both of them still dripping water, and threw Angel onto the bed. The next hour was a blur of lust and satisfaction to Angel, as again and again he lifted her to orgasm, until she could hardly tell when one ended and the next began.

When they finally exhausted themselves, Ursa leaned over Angel's naked body, running his finger down between her breasts, drawing patterns in the beads of sweat that covered her. He smiled down at her and said, "You're hot again. Let me get you something cool to drink."

Angel watched as he walked across the room, loving the movement of the muscles beneath the skin of his taut buttocks and broad back. His long legs had little hair, and his thigh muscles were strong and lithe. When Ursa turned, he held a tray with two cups and a bowl, which he brought back to the bed. He gave one cup to Angel, then reached into the bowl and pulled out an ice cube. As Angel sipped at the cool juice in the cup, Ursa ran the ice cube over her breasts, down her flat belly, then circled her mound of curls with it.

Angel shivered with pleasure as his hand moved between her legs, and he started to move the melting cube around. The cool breeze blowing through the shutters caressed her naked body, and she began to feel drowsy, completely relaxed and totally sated.

Angel drifted into sleep.

Ursa stood looking down at the human women who lay sprawled across his bed. The sleeping drug in her drink had worked faster than he had anticipated, and he worried for a moment that he had made it too strong. He quickly checked her pulse and breathing. No, she was fine, just deeply asleep.

The Centauri smiled in satisfaction. This was what he had been aiming for since he had first met Angel. Her attraction to him had been obvious from the start, and he had to admit that it was mutual. Ursa had never seen a woman who aroused his passions as much as this 'Angel' did. He had wanted to have sex with her from the moment they met. He knew that it was anatomically possible for them to give each other pleasure, even if it wasn't exactly the usual way in which Centauri mated.

But Ursa was driven more by his ambition than his desire to seduce this beautiful woman. After the first reception for the humans, the Emperor had told his courtiers that they were each to do their utmost to separate one of them from the rest. Ideally, the Emperor would have liked this to be the Captain or his First Officer, but any member of their families would be acceptable.

Ursa had been anxious about his uncle's plan for the two officers, concerned that those plans might succeed and that his own seduction of Angel would then be unnecessary. He smiled to himself, deciding that even if his uncle had succeeded, having sex with Angel would still have been a goal worth pursuing in its own right. With a little training, she could become a perfect pleasure slave. Ursa had been delighted when the Captain and Commander Matheson had reappeared so abruptly, knowing this meant that his uncle's plans had failed. So Ursa would get his chance at impressing the Emperor by fulfilling his wishes.

For the next few hours, Ursa had done everything in his power to please Angel, to give her pleasure like none she had ever known, gradually building her trust until she was willing to disobey the Captain's orders and leave the beach. As soon as she had agreed to come with him to the palace, Ursa knew he had won. He could have drugged her as soon as they arrived in his rooms, but he had decided that he wanted one more round of pleasure with her first.

Ursa tugged at his lower lip as he considered his next steps. He found that he was reluctant to carry Angel, naked, to the Emperor. For a moment, he wondered why he felt like that. Had she somehow wormed her way into his affections? He shook the thought away; impossible, he couldn't possibly have feelings for this girl. Nevertheless, Ursa took a few moments to dress Angel, before he carried her to the Emperor's rooms. As he walked, he found himself hoping that whatever the Emperor had planned for Angel wouldn't harm her.

Londo looked down at the girl who Ursa had just brought to his rooms, hating what he would be forced to watch happen to her. He leaned forward and brushed a strand of hair away from her face, [Such a pretty face.] he thought and whispered, "I am so sorry, my dear. Believe me, if I had any choices left, I would never let this happen." He knew it was pointless, she couldn't hear him, and by the time she could, it would be too late.

The Emperor turned as he felt a presence behind him. His Drakh Master loomed out of the shadows to stand at his shoulder, looking down at the girl. Londo had never been able to make out any trace of feeling or emotion on the Drakh's face, and today was no exception. There was no telling what the Drakh was thinking or feeling. Did he also regret what he was about to do? Londo doubted it, but he made one last attempt to save the woman from her fate.

"Is this really necessary? There are other ways..." Mollari trailed off in the face of the Drakh's stony stare.

The hissing, grating voice emerged, saying, "It may be unnecessary. It may not even achieve what we wish, but it will improve the odds in our favor. So it will be done."

The Drakh pulled apart his robe, exposing his scaly chest. The Emperor watched in disgust as part of the chest started to pulse, remembering all too well when he had last witnessed this atrocity, on the day when his own Keeper had been attached. The pulsating gradually changed, and a large scale tore itself from the Drakh's chest, leaving a weeping sore behind it, and dropping to the floor. As it hit the ground, long thin tentacles unfurled themselves and the scale used them to scuttle across the floor toward the couch where Angel lay.



The Drakh's voice grated instructions, "Turn her over. Bare her neck."

Londo did as he was instructed, gently lifting Angel and laying her on her stomach, then pushing aside the straps of her red dress, so that her back and neck were completely exposed. He watched as the awful thing hooked a tentacle around the girl's shoulder and used it to lever itself onto her back. It climbed up her spine, settling itself where her neck joined her right shoulder, wrapping its tentacles around her neck and under her arm, securing itself to her.

Mollari gave silent thanks that Angel was unconscious. Unlike him she would not feel the agony when the Keeper sank its...what? Its claws? Its teeth? Londo had never been sure. He only knew that the Keeper had sunk something into his body, spiking straight into his nervous system, through which it controlled him. Sometimes it did so indirectly, using excruciating pain, sometimes directly by taking control of his body. Mollari preferred the pain. At least that way, he felt alive, not like a dead man walking around in someone else's body.

The Emperor watched, cursing himself over and over again for going along with this, as the Keeper attached to Angel's neck faded from view. The girl started to awaken, under whatever stimulus the Keeper had applied. She lifted her head briefly, and shook it, but the effort was too much and she let her head drop back to the cushion, while she took a few deep breaths. Angel tried again, this time pushing herself upright on the couch, barely catching the top of her dress as it started to fall. She held it to her breasts, trying to focus on Mollari and the Drakh standing next to him.

Londo held out a cup of water to Angel, knowing that the drug Ursa had used would have left her mouth dry. She took it with one hand, the other continuing to hold up her dress, and drank eagerly. The cool liquid seemed to help bring her to her senses as she looked at Londo again, and whispered, "Your Majesty?" Her eyes slid to the Drakh standing next to him and widened. "Who...? What...? Where is Ursa? Where are my sisters?"

Mollari's heart was breaking for her as she whispered her betrayer's name. He tried to be as gentle as he

could but had no choice except to reply, "You have no sisters any more, my dear. You have no family other than those you see before you."

Londo sat in his room, clutching his bottle of Brevari to his chest. That had been his reward for cooperating, a single bottle of the spirit. It was only enough to knock out his Keeper for a few minutes, but he had every intention of using those minutes constructively. Or was it destructively?

As he felt his Keeper slide into sleep, Mollari summoned a guard, who stood to attention in front of his Emperor, awaiting instructions.

The Emperor grinned maliciously. "Find Ursa Baronni and arrest him. Then take him back to the capital for execution. But before he dies, I want the executioner to remove his attributes one by one. Slowly."

The guard saluted and left.

Mollari knew his order was capricious and vindictive, but he had come to hate the man who had betrayed the beautiful human girl. He sighed and thought through the plans the Drakh now had for the woman.

After a couple of hours to allow her Keeper to acclimatize itself to her body and nervous system, she would be returned to her family and friends. When her Keeper had become accustomed to her, it would be able to control her with few visible signs. It was unlikely that the others would notice any change in her, and unsuspecting, they would take her back to the Excalibur with them, when told that the Emperor was unable to continue talks that day.

Once aboard, her Keeper would control Angel and use her to sabotage the ship's weapons and security systems. That would open the vessel to invasion by the Centauri, who would capture the ship and kill the crew. The Captain and First Officer would be brought back down to the planet for public execution as enemies of the state.

Mollari sighed deeply as he took another long pull on the bottle of Brevari. He had a plan that he thought might save their wives and children, but there was little hope now for the Captain and crew of the Excalibur.

Cross-examination

Demon slowly lifted through waves of sleep, roused by an uncomfortable feeling of... of what? What exactly was it that had awoken her? She became aware that her head was resting on her favorite pillow, her husband's chest, and that he was stroking her hair as she lay there. Looking up into Matthew's face, she smiled and asked, "Didn't you nap?"

Matthew smiled back. "Not a chance with the noise you were making. The Centauries came by to check, as they thought they were having an earthquake. I told them not to worry, it was just you snoring."

Demon laughed and turned her head to kiss his chest, then frowned. The uncomfortable feeling was still there. She sat upright and looked down at Matthew as he lay back against the cushions, smiling up at her. "Seriously, did you get any rest? If the talks don't start until evening, they could go on all night."

"I know. But I don't trust these people enough to just go to sleep when we have no guards around. I may not have any weapons, other than you and your sisters, but I'd hate to be literally caught napping."

Matthew smiled and reached out to tuck a stray curl back behind Demon's ear. She closed her eyes and leaned her head into his hand, then jerked her head back and frowned again. "Damn it! Something's wrong!" She shook her head, trying to pin down the feeling.

Her husband sat up next to her, watching her carefully. "Is it the hate thing again?"

Demon shook her head. "No, it's something else. Something is... missing." She focused her senses and gasped as she found the source of her discomfort. "Angel has gone!" Demon stared at Matthew, sternly controlling the panic welling up inside her. "I can't find Angel. I can't link to her, Matthew. She's gone!"

Matthew stood and pulled Demon to her feet. "Is your link broken? Is it like when Lucas took her away?" Demon watched as he pulled the black robe over his head, then started to dress in his uniform.

"No. That hurt, this doesn't. It's just numb. There's a place in my head where the link should be, and it's just sort of... numb is the only word I can think of."

Matthew was now fully dressed. "OK, let's not panic. She may have wandered off somewhere with Ursa where the link doesn't work. But I tell you, Deborah, if she's disobeyed my orders and left the beach, I'm going to teach her a lesson about orders that she'll never forget!"

Demon could hear the anger rising in Matthew's voice and saw the tension in his face. Not that she disagreed with him. "When we find her, we'll throw her in the brig and keep her on bread and water for a month. We can take it in turns going in there and yelling at her, but please, Matthew, let's just find her!"

By now, Demon was working hard at controlling her fears. She had no idea why she was panicking so much, but it was taking all the control she had not to start sending her fright.

Gideon grabbed Deborah's hand and ran out of the tent with her, heading back up the beach. As they ran, Deborah told him that she'd linked to Lily, who couldn't feel Angel either. Gideon was furious. He'd thought that he and Angel had an agreement, and that she'd come to terms with being a part of his crew and taking his orders. If the stupid girl had disobeyed him and gotten herself into trouble... He pushed his anger aside and focused on the immediate issue. They needed to find Angel.

Arriving at the other tent, they found all three occupants fully dressed and waiting for them. As a group, they went to the tent where Angel and Ursa had been and found it empty. Gideon's anger threatened to burst out of him again, but he could see Deborah looking at him anxiously, so he controlled himself sharply. This was not the time for an outburst of temper.

Close examination of the tent showed that there were no signs of a struggle, Angel's clothes had gone, but her bag was still there. She had probably dressed and left the tent, but intended to return. She had probably thought that no one would notice her absence. [Tough luck, Angel. You should know your sisters better than that.]

Gideon turned to the others, seeing Deborah holding Lily tightly as the little redhead's alarm surfaced as tears. He knew that Deborah was drawing as much comfort from holding her little sister as she was providing by holding her, so he left them to console each other as he ordered his party back to the shuttle.

Overriding their protests he said, "This is just a precaution. There may be nothing in it, but I'll go to the palace and find Angel. John, keep wide open to me. If it is something more, if they have done anything to Angel, I'll want you to take off immediately, get back to the Excalibur and get the hell out of here."

His XO acknowledged his orders with a nod, even though Gideon could see how reluctant John was to leave him behind. Deborah started to protest, but the Captain was unmoving. "You can't do anything. Stay with the others. That's an order. If there's a problem, kiss Marcus for me and tell him I love him." He hugged his wife fiercely, then turned to leave the tent.

Luke called him back. "Captain, I think I should go with you. If Angel is hurt, you may need medical support." Gideon paused. Luke had a point, and having him as back up was better than going in alone.

John reinforced the point. "I have a closer telepathic link with Luke. It will be much easier for me to pick up a message from him than from you, Captain."

Gideon allowed himself to be convinced. "OK, Doc, you're with me. The rest of you, back to the shuttle and prepare to blast off on Luke's signal." He hugged Deborah one last time, sending all his love as hard as he could, knowing that would mean more to her than any words he could say, then he left the tent with Luke hard on his heels.

The Emperor was slumped on his throne, half asleep, when his guards roused him with the news that Captain Gideon was demanding to speak to him, insisting that his wife's sister be found and brought to him immediately. Mollari felt his Keeper stir, and knew that this would take careful handling. How had Gideon become aware that Angel was missing? Londo knew that her Keeper would not yet have had time to learn how to control her without the others noticing. He would have to buy them some time, but he suspected that Captain Gideon was not a patient man.

Mollari ordered the guard to bring Gideon to the throne room. Perhaps this could be turned to his advantage. The Emperor paused. And just whose side was he on at this point? Could he work toward freeing Gideon and getting him and his ship out of Centauri space before the Drakh could attack? Or should he focus on the needs of his own people and planet, letting the Captain and his crew fight their own battles, as soon as he had got what he wanted from them.

The Emperor sighed. He may not get the choice if his Keeper took control. He watched as Gideon and his ship's doctor entered the throne room.

John Matheson sat rigidly at the controls of the shuttle, strapped into the pilot's seat, staring out of the front windscreen, locking down on his feelings as they threatened to overwhelm him. He, Lily and Demon had arrived at the shuttle a few moments before. They had crept through the gardens, managing to get back to the shuttle unnoticed, while Gideon had provided a loud distraction for the Centauri guards. They had been able to hear him yelling and shouting all the way across the gardens as they made their way quietly through the shrubs and trees. John half smiled to himself as he remembered some of the things Matthew had been yelling. His Captain certainly knew how to act as a decoy when he needed to.

John, Demon and Lily had crept up the ramp and into the shuttle, and as far as John could tell, they hadn't been seen. On arrival he had unlocked the controls and prepped the shuttle for take-off. With its near silent engines and VTOL capabilities, John was sure that they could be well on their way before the

Centauri even noticed they had gone. Now he waited, mind wide open to Luke, for the signal he dreaded.

Every instinct in John fought against leaving Luke and his Captain behind, but he knew he might have to. Gideon had placed the safety of the Excalibur and her crew in John's hands, and John would not let his Captain down, no matter how much it hurt. So he sat, rigid in his seat, staring forward but fully aware of Lily strapped into her seat behind him, crying quietly. He desperately wanted to comfort her, but he didn't dare leave his post, or even reach out with his mind to caress hers, in case he missed the signal.

The silence inside the shuttle was becoming oppressive as the minutes ticked by. John glanced over his shoulder quickly, and saw that Demon still stood by the door, looking out. The late afternoon sun created a pool of shadow just inside the shuttle, and standing there in her dark dress, Demon could see out, whilst remaining almost invisible to anyone outside. She had stayed in that spot, totally motionless, since they had returned, but John could feel the intensity of her concentration from where he sat. He knew that Demon was stretching her senses as wide as she could, trying to pick up the slightest nuance of emotion around the island, hoping to sense her husband and sister returning.

John heard a soft sigh and looked over his shoulder again. Demon had turned to face him and Lily inside the shuttle, and she whispered softly, "I'm sorry. I can't do this. Lily, if anything happens, take care of Marcus." Then she was gone, moving so fast that she was out of sight in a split second.

Lily screamed, "NO!" after her and started to struggle with the straps holding in her seat, when John sent her a loud mental and verbal command.

*"STOP!" Lily paused, startled at the force of his order. John went on more gently, "We have to stay here, Lily. I have to follow Matthew's orders, and you have to stay with me. The safety of the ship, and of our children on the ship, *must* come first. It's killing me to even think of leaving Luke and Matthew behind, and I know how much the thought of leaving Luke and your sisters will hurt you. But if that's the price we have to pay to save our children, then somehow we have to find the courage. Stay with me, Lily. Help me find the strength to do this."*

Lily reached out her hand, barely able to touch his face from where she sat, tears streaming down her face as she nodded and subsided in her seat.

John turned back and stared out of the front of the shuttle, mind wide open.

"Where's Angel?" Gideon's words and stance were confrontational, implacable, the manner of a man determined to have a straight answer to a straight question.

Mollari considered the Captain and Doctor as they stood before his throne. He had his orders from the Drakh who was his master, the Drakh who stood in the shadows created by the drapery around the throne, listening and observing everything going on in the throne room. The orders were to delay, and Londo did his best.

"How should I know, Captain? Surely you take responsibility for your own crew, and particularly for your own family? Am I supposed to keep track if your sister-in-law wanders off?" Londo kept his tone light, trying to appear as if he didn't take the Captain seriously. He watched as Gideon's eyes narrowed, and he glared at the Emperor.

"Angel was last seen with one of your men. Ursa Baronni was with her, and I want you to find Ursa and

bring him here, so we can question him. Perhaps that way, we can find out what happened to Angel." The words were spat out through gritted teeth. The Captain continued, "But let me make it clear now, your Majesty," the title was almost an insult, "If any harm has come to Angel, I will consider it a clear indication of a lack of faith on the part of you and your people, and all discussions will be at an end."

Mollari waved his hands, trying to calm Gideon. "Captain, Captain, this is so unnecessary! I am sure that the delightful young lady has just wandered off with Ursa, and lost track of the time. I will send my guards to look for them, but please, be patient. There are a lot of rooms in the palace and a lot of places on the island that Ursa could have taken her. It will take a little time."

Gideon shook his head vehemently. "I'm not buying it. Ursa had a commlink when we last saw him. He used it to speak to his uncle. Call him on it. Now."

The Emperor could see that it was hopeless. Gideon was determined to find Angel, and the way he looked at that moment, he could very well start tearing the palace down with his bare hands to find her. Mollari sighed and waved to a guard, who left the room. He wanted to give Gideon the impression that they were calling Ursa and getting him to bring Angel back. In fact, the guard had been briefed to know that Mollari's signal meant that he was to go to the room where Angel was being held, and bring her to the throne room.

A few moments passed in tense silence, as Gideon stood, hands on hips, glaring at Mollari. The Captain was chewing the inside of his lip and bore a startling resemblance to a volcano that was about to erupt. The silence lengthened, and the tension increased by the second.

Gideon shifted his stance, and Mollari could see that another outburst was imminent, when the guard came back, with Angel following him. She smiled brightly at the Captain and spoke cheerfully. "Hello. Have you been worried about me? I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have left the beach without telling you, but some insect bit me and Ursa said he had something that would soothe it, so we came back to the palace. I suppose we must have lost track of the time." Angel blushed slightly and dropped her eyes, looking a little embarrassed. Mollari was impressed. The Keeper was doing an excellent job of imitating Angel's behavior. Was it good enough to fool the Captain?

Before he could find out, the Doctor stepped forward, saying, "Let me see where you were bitten." Angel held out her hand, and they could all see the red lump there, the welt that had been carefully applied a short time before to provide this excuse. Raven lifted her hand and examined it closely. After a moment, he looked up at Angel and asked, "Why didn't you come to me? I could have taken care of this for you."

Angel smiled prettily and blushed again. "You were busy at the time, Luke."

Mollari watched as the Doctor also blushed. It was obvious what 'busy' meant in this context.

Gideon and Raven seemed to be relaxing now that Angel stood in front of them, unharmed apart from the 'insect bite' on her hand. The Captain was sternly lecturing the girl about the importance of obeying orders, and how she had worried them all, but Mollari began to think that perhaps the original plan of getting Angel on board the Excalibur to sabotage the ship might work after all.

Then a voice came from the entrance to the throne room. "That's not Angel."

Gideon swung round to see his wife standing in the doorway. Suppressing a flare of anger, he sighed

deeply, *[Does anyone round here give a damn about my orders?]* At least Deborah was alone, so it seemed that John and Lily were still at the shuttle, waiting for his signal, either to take off or to stand down. Maybe he should get Lily to give her sisters some instruction on obedience. The Captain snorted silently to himself. *[Yeah, and that will be the day the Excalibur turns into a flying pig.]*

"What do you mean? Of course it's Angel." Gideon's irritation at Deborah having flouted his orders came out in his words.

Deborah pointed at her sister. "It's Angel's body, but it's not Angel speaking. It's something else. Something inside her, controlling her. I can feel her struggling against it, but she can't break free. It's the thing that hates. It has her in its power."

Gideon turned to look at Angel, just catching the expression of pain and horror that flitted across her face at Deborah's words. Angel's lips moved, but no sound emerged. The words she seemed to be trying to say, but couldn't, were, "Help me!" Then Angel's face changed. Her face became blank and she turned, moving jerkily across the room to stand by the side of the throne where the Emperor sat.

The Captain shifted his gaze to Mollari's face and was appalled to see the same blank expression as Angel wore. Deborah's voice came from where she'd moved to stand at his side. "They're both the same, Matthew. They're both being controlled by something. That's why I could feel different things at different times from the Emperor. Sometimes I could feel him, and sometimes... the thing."

Mollari sat upright and waved at the guards. Before Gideon could react, he, Demon and Luke were surrounded. Five guards stood in a loose circle, all pointing large guns. *[Oh shit! How in hell do I get us out of this one?]* Gideon's mind started to race as he lifted his right hand and gave Luke the agreed signal. He knew that Luke would tell John to take off immediately. Whatever happened now, John and Lily would be safely on their way back to the ship. Gideon only hoped that John could get them back up there before the Centauri could pick them up on their screens and scramble fighters in pursuit. There was nothing he could do about that now, so he focused on what Mollari was saying.

"It would seem that we have to change our plans." The Emperor's face had relaxed again, and as far as Gideon could tell, it was the real Mollari who was speaking to them. The Captain stood motionless as the guards removed the commlinks from their wrists. It was pointless trying to fight when the odds were this heavily stacked against them. He would wait for a better opportunity. Gideon reached out and took his wife's hand as he listened, waiting to hear their fate. They were completely powerless... for the moment.

Mollari continued, explaining what they had planned to do with Angel, who still stood rigidly next to him, obviously totally controlled by whatever it was they had done to her.

"But thanks to your wife's intervention--and you must tell me sometime how you did that, my dear--we now have to change our plans. Captain, you and your party are prisoners. You will call your ship and order them to surrender to my forces. I am sure you appreciate that without you or your First Officer in command, they would not hold out for long against a determined assault. Why waste lives? Surrender now, and your crew and family at least will live."

Mollari paused, and for a moment, Gideon thought the Emperor looked genuinely sad. "I'm afraid that for you and Commander Matheson there is no hope. You will both be executed as enemies of the Republic. Agree to surrender and your deaths will be quick and clean. Refuse, and you will be executed by public dissection, after you have watched your friends and family die in the same way. The choice is yours."

Luke listened in horror as the Emperor spoke. He knew that Gideon would never agree to surrender. He only hoped that Mollari was bluffing, but he had a horrible suspicion that he wasn't. Luke had heard that this method of execution was a centuries old tradition among the Centauri. He watched as the Captain squeezed Demon's hand tightly, then said softly to the Emperor. "Go to hell."

A guard rushed into the room and over to the throne where Mollari sat, whispering into the Emperor's ear. The old Centauri sat up abruptly and glared at Gideon. "How did you do that? How did you get orders to the shuttle?" Luke suppressed a bitter smile. He had been in mental contact with John ever since they entered the throne room, keeping him apprised of everything that happened there. As soon as Gideon gave the signal, Luke had told John to take off. With every minute that had passed since, his link to his lover had stretched and become more tenuous, but Luke knew that meant that John and Lily were closer and closer to the safety of the ship. With one last thought, [I love you all,] Luke had felt the contact with John snap.

Gideon grinned at the Emperor. "You seem to have forgotten that my First Officer is a telepath. He knows everything that has happened in this room and will now take the Excalibur out of orbit and back to the ISA. But he'll come back, and he'll bring a fleet with him. If we're not here waiting for him, fit and healthy, you'll have a war on your hands, Mollari. Are you strong enough to fight the whole Inter-Stellar Alliance? Do you really want another war?"

Luke had no idea whether Gideon was bluffing or telling the truth, but it sounded convincing to him, and the Emperor paused, considering his words.

Mollari shook his head. "Your ship will never get back to the ISA, even with your First Officer back on board. We will shoot her down, and if the Centauri fleet can't do it alone, then our allies will soon be here to help." As the Emperor spoke, a figure stepped out of the shadows behind the throne and moved into the light. It was a race Luke had only ever seen in pictures. It was a Drakh.

Angel watched the scene in the throne room, horrified at everything that had happened, but unable to move a muscle or say a word. The thing... the Keeper they had attached to her controlled her so completely that she couldn't even weep. It had been bad enough when they had held her in a room in the palace while the Keeper worked on her, stimulating different nerve endings, forcing her vocal chords to make sounds, moving her this way and that, until it could control her completely. Angel had wept and raged internally at her own stupidity in trusting Ursa and allowing this to happen.

That rage had turned to horror, when the guard had come for Angel and the Keeper had walked her through to the throne room. Seeing Matthew and Luke waiting for her there had nearly broken her mind and spirit. These men had put themselves in danger to come back for her, and Angel had despaired, as she had been unable to tell them what had happened to her. The sound of her own voice telling the lies that seemed to convince Matthew and Luke, had made Angel want to scream. She was still unsure whether she was happy or sad that Demon had appeared and found the truth, that it was the Keeper talking, not Angel. At least knowing what had been done to her, perhaps there was a chance that Matthew and Luke could save her.

Mollari's words had removed all hope and Angel's guilt had overwhelmed her as she heard the fate in store for Matthew and John. She had never loved her Captain more than when he had stood so straight and brave, telling Mollari to go to hell, but Angel was terrified of the consequences of his actions. Would the Emperor carry out his threat and execute them all so horribly? Angel feared he might and that her

stupidity had brought all of them to this. Their deaths would be her fault.

Angel wanted to scream her pain and guilt, but the Keeper wouldn't let her. It had her locked motionless in her place next to the throne, as she watched in mounting horror as the Drakh reappeared and ordered Mollari to have John and Lily's shuttle shot down and Demon, Matthew and Luke confined to a cell shielded from telepaths. Angel watched as her family was led away.

If she could have used her powers to kill the Drakh, the Emperor and every person in the room, including herself, Angel would have done so, but the Keeper was somehow blocking her telekinesis and her link to her sisters. She could do nothing but stand where the Keeper put her and watch. She watched as the Drakh left and Mollari dismissed the guards.

Turning to a small cupboard, Mollari pulled out a bottle and quickly emptied the contents into his mouth. He staggered slightly, then pulled out another bottle and moved over to Angel, grabbing her and immobilizing her. The Emperor forced her mouth open and started to pour the liquid down Angel's throat. It burned as it went down, and Angel realized it was a strong spirit of some kind. Her Keeper struggled against Mollari's grip, so Angel decided that whatever the Emperor was doing must be for her benefit. She fought with the Keeper internally as Mollari fought with it externally. Angel could feel it trying to call to its Master for help, and used all her powers to suppress the thing inside her. She couldn't stop it controlling her body, but she still had the strength to fight it with her mind.

Very quickly, Angel began to feel dizzy and drunk, and as she did so, she felt her Keeper slide into unconsciousness. For the first time in hours, she was back in control. Angel's knees gave way and she sank to the floor, weeping and screaming her despair. She felt Mollari's hand on her arm, and he pulled her upright to stand in front of him.

"We don't have time for that. This is the only way to regain control, but it doesn't last. Our Keepers will soon be awake. I have only done this for you to prevent your Keeper stopping me doing what I need to do. Watch and learn."

Mollari turned and waved at the far wall, which lit up with a viewscreen. The screen showed a schematic map of the upper atmosphere of the planet. In her fuddled state, it took Angel a few moments to focus on the symbols, eventually realizing that the large red cross must be the Excalibur, and the small red symbol moving toward it must be the shuttle. The shuttle symbol was surrounded by black deltas, indicating the Centauri pursuit ships. Angel watched as a burst of red crosses emerged from the Excalibur and she realized that the ship must have launched a fighter wing to bring the shuttle to safety. She sighed with relief as the small red cross was absorbed inside the larger one, and the other red crosses stayed circling outside. John and Lily had made it home.

Angel turned to look at Mollari who was smiling at her, eyes slightly unfocused as he took another pull at the bottle he held tightly. "When my Keeper was asleep earlier, I gave instructions to my guards that if the shuttle escaped they were to let it go, but not to be too obvious about it. I had hoped that all of your family would be able to escape that way. It was brave and foolish of the Captain and the others to come looking for you. They should have left you."

Angel nodded sadly, feeling very woozy with the alcohol, but aware enough to agree. "I wish they had. If anything happens to them because of me..." She started to sob bitterly, and dropped her head into her hands. Angel felt the Emperor's hand on her head, gently stroking her hair as she wept, and looked up. "Can you save them? I don't ask anything for myself, it's all my own fault, but can you save my sister? And Matthew and Luke? Please?"

The sad expression on Mollari's face told its own story. "I might be able to save your sister and the doctor, but there is no hope for the Captain. My allies are determined that he must die. All I can do is to try to make his death quick and dignified." Angel dropped her head back into her hands and wept again. Because of her stupidity, Matthew was going to die and Angel knew that Demon would never be able to live without him. She had cost two of the people she loved most in the universe their lives.

Mollari watched as the young woman wept, and he knew he had no words of comfort for her. He drank deeply from the bottle again, forcing his Keeper back into sleep. He knew he would pay for this later, but he had a plan at last. A plan that would lift at least one of the threats the Drakh held over his people, if not all.

The viewscreen gave out a bell like tone, and the Emperor turned and waved it on. Commander Matheson's face looked out of the screen at him. Mollari wondered about the XO of the Excalibur. A quiet man, his contributions to the negotiations had been calm and constructive. Much more reserved and less volatile than his Captain, but Mollari sensed that a will of iron lay beneath that cool surface. The one thing that had come across strongly in all his dealings with the Commander was his absolute loyalty to Captain Gideon. Mollari knew that Matheson would follow his Captain to hell and back, but would he give up his ship in exchange for his Captain's life? Now was the time to find out.

Matheson nodded an acknowledgment of the Emperor's greeting, then cut straight to the point. "You have my Captain, his wife, her sister and our ship's doctor as prisoners in your palace. Please do not insult me by trying to pretend otherwise. Either release them immediately, or face the prospect of war with the Inter-Stellar Alliance."

As far as Mollari could tell, the Commander meant every word.

Demon sat on the bunk in the cell, rigidly controlling herself as she watched Matthew pace the floor. Her grief at what had been done to her sister threatened to overwhelm her at every moment, but she refused to add to her husband's burdens by showing her pain. Luke sat next to her, holding her hand tightly, and Demon wasn't sure whether he was trying to give or seek comfort, but she knew that the warmth of his hand on hers was helping her keep control.

Demon's mind was in turmoil as she went over the choices she had made, and the consequences of her choices. She had chosen to put her husband and sister before her son, and the guilt that she felt as a result of that decision was crippling her. Demon reached out through her link to Marcus and found that he was sleeping. Part of her prayed that he would stay that way and would never know that his mother had chosen to abandon him.

Her guilt mounted as she realized that she was doing to Marcus just what her mother had done to her. It was even worse in fact. Demon's father had abandoned her mother; her mother hadn't willingly chosen her fate. Her mother's inability to cope with that loss was hardly her fault, but Demon had always blamed her mother for being weak and unable to carry on loving her child afterwards. She now saw how unfair that had been, now she was facing the same fate as her mother, the loss of the thing that mattered most to her: her husband's love.

Demon also saw how much her own life had been affected by her parents' actions. How in abandoning

her, they had shaped her into the person she had become, who had always been willing to care for others as long as she remained in control, but who had for many years been unable to trust anyone to take care of her in turn. In Matthew, she had finally met the one person she felt able to trust, someone she could rely on, who she could lean on, and who Demon knew loved her enough to want to take care of her. In their years together, she and Matthew had created a mutual dependency, a willingness to share each other's burdens and sorrows, as well as their joys. Demon couldn't even contemplate losing that. She didn't know how she could possibly live without Matthew's love.

Clamping down hard on her emotions, Demon sent a wave of love through her link to her son, hoping that he would feel it in his dreams, along with a simple thought. [*Forgive me.*] She tried to tell herself that Lily would care for Marcus and love him as much as she had, and that Lily would make sure that Marcus knew how much his parents had loved him.

Demon's thoughts turned to her sisters and her anguish grew. She had always been there for them, always tried to take care of them, and now she had failed them completely. She had failed to keep Angel safe, despite all her warnings, [*I should have tried harder!*]



Demon felt that she had also failed Lily. If she had gone with John and Lily on the shuttle, then Lily would only be losing one sister now, not two. [*I'm sorry, Lily, please forgive me!*] How would Lily go on without her sisters and her lover? Demon squeezed Luke's hand tighter, wishing that he were back on the Excalibur, ready to help Lily with her loss rather than adding to it.

Demon almost smiled as she thought of her last sister, the youngest, the sister who had for many years been almost a daughter to Demon. Ilas may be out of their link, and the loss of Angel and Demon wouldn't hurt her as badly as it did Lily, but she would still be distraught at the death of two of her sisters. Demon was glad that Max and Dureena would be there for Ilas when she needed them.

Demon closed her eyes, feeling Lily trying to link to her and she let out a sigh of relief as her sister told her that she and John were safely inside the Excalibur. Lily told her that the pursuing ships hadn't seemed to be trying very hard to catch them, and had retreated immediately when the Excalibur launched a fighter wing. Demon leaned against Luke's shoulder, hoping that any watchers would think that she was just seeking his comfort, and whispered into his ear, "They're home." They had said very little since they had been put in the cell, suspecting that their words and actions were being monitored. Luke squeezed her hand tightly, but showed no other outward reaction to her news.

Standing, Demon went to her husband and rested her hand on his shoulder, stopping his pacing, and he turned to take her into his arms. As she laid her head on his shoulder, she again breathed her news into his ear. Matthew hugged her tightly, lifting his head to kiss her forehead, as he stroked her hair and said, "Don't worry, we'll figure a way out of this."

Demon could feel Matthew's whirlpool of emotion, a mixture of anger, guilt, grief and fear. He was worried about what lay ahead for them all, but she could feel his determination that he would not give up his ship at any price. She also knew that he was lying, that he had no hope of rescue and was preparing to die. Demon forced herself not to cry as Matthew went on, "I wish you'd stayed on the shuttle. Why did you come back?"

Demon lifted her head and smiled sadly at him. "I couldn't leave you behind. If it had been the other way round, could you have left me?"

Matthew smiled gently and ran his thumb along her cheekbone. "No. I could never leave you." He took a deep breath and looked deep into her eyes before he went on, "I wish I knew what John was doing now. I wish there were some way I could get a message to him."

Demon knew exactly what her husband was asking and what he needed. "Oh, I expect that he's on the bridge, demanding that we're released, and threatening war if we're not." Part of her mind linked to Lily and obtained that information. "What would you say to him, if you could get a message out?"

Matthew smiled and kissed her, knowing that she had just offered him a way to communicate with his ship. The cell they were in might block telepaths, but it couldn't block Demon's link to her sister or to her son.

"I'd tell him to get my ship the hell out of here." Matthew pulled Demon against him, so she lowered her head to his shoulder again as she sent his message to Lily.

The response was almost instant, and Demon faked a small chuckle, "Knowing John, I very much doubt that he'd agree to that. He'd tell you that he's in command of the Excalibur now, not you, and that he wouldn't abandon us that easily." Lily's sense of outrage and pain at the thought of abandoning her family had come through loud and clear with the message. Demon had no doubt that John felt much the same.

Matthew leaned back and lifted Demon's chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. "If he said any such thing, I'd tell him that the safety of the crew and the ship comes first. There are more than three hundred people on that ship. Their safety has to come before that of the four of us down here." Demon knew how much that must have cost her husband, as she sent the message. Matthew knew that he was condemning her to death as well as himself, and his pain and guilt were almost overwhelming.

Demon leaned into him and kissed him gently. She summoned all her strength to speak calmly. "I love you, Matthew. Whatever happens, that will never change. I think I can finally understand my mother." She watched as her husband frowned at her, puzzled by her words. Demon kissed him again and continued, "I would rather die with you than live without you."

Matthew's face showed his pain at her words, and he shook his head. "I won't let that happen, if I can help it. It would be bad enough for Marcus to lose one parent. To lose both of us..."

Demon pressed her fingers to Matthew's lips to stop him. "Like my mother, I would drown in grief if I were to lose you. I wouldn't know how to go on living and it would hurt to even look at Marcus, as he would be a constant reminder of what I'd lost. Without you by my side, I would be a very bad mother, just as my mother was. Marcus will be better off knowing that we died loving him, with Lily to love him and take care of him, than he would be if I were to go on living without you."

Demon's control had started to slip as she spoke, and although she showed no emotion in her expression, she could feel her face become wet. She watched as her husband's eyes filled and tears escaped to roll down his cheeks, but like her, he kept his face immobile. Demon lifted her hand and wiped away Matthew's tears, before burying her head into his shoulder.

Defense

Commander Matheson stared at the blank viewscreen where a moment before, Emperor Mollari had looked out at him, then he turned to look at Lily. She was standing, stiffly upright but as pale as a ghost, next to the Captain's chair. Unable to reach out physically in front of the Bridge crew, John sent a mental caress, knowing that it would help a little with the terrible pain Lily was feeling, and drawing comfort from her, to ease his own anguish at what could lie ahead of them.

Their ride back to the Excalibur had been nerve-racking, with the Centauri pursuit ships not far behind them, and catching up with them fast. John had been puzzled to find that he had been able to call on ahead to the Excalibur and request a fighter escort for the last stretch. He didn't understand why the Centauri hadn't blocked his communications, as he knew they could. It was a part of the same puzzle as to why the Centauri had given up so easily as soon as the Excalibur launched fighters. Why bother to pursue at all, if they were going to turn back so soon?

Mollari's response to Matheson's threats had been equally puzzling. While the threat of war seemed to have little impact on the Emperor, he had nevertheless been conciliatory. John's concern was that he was being stalled, while the Centauri moved their forces into position for attack. He turned to the sensor station and ordered a full sweep and report on the positions of the Centauri fleet. The result added to the mystery.

Roughly one third of the ships in the area were moving into positions from which they could launch an attack, but the other ships weren't shifting. By remaining in place, some of them were actually blocking the others' attack vectors. The sensor operator turned in his chair, frowning. He asked Matheson to join him, and showed him the results of the scans on the surrounding vessels. The mystery deepened further when John realized what the scans were showing him. All of the ships in motion showed only one or two life signs, and that was of a totally unfamiliar nature. Not humanoid, not of any race previously encountered by the Excalibur, and certainly not Centauri. So who was operating those Centauri ships? And just to make things even more puzzling, all the stationary vessels had full Centauri crew on board.

Matheson pushed the puzzle to one side and returned to the Captain's chair, where Lily still stood. She was holding herself together surprisingly well, considering what she was facing. The loss of one of her sisters would have been incredibly painful for her; the loss of both could be catastrophic. John had no idea whether her mental link to him could help her through that loss. If they were to lose Luke as well... John wasn't sure how they would go on in the face of such a loss, and if Matthew were to die too... Matheson refused to even think about what this would mean to him.

To lose his mentor, the man who had been prepared to help John make his dream of a career in Earthforce a reality, the man who had become John's only real friend before he had met Luke and Lily. To allow this man to die, to leave Matthew behind for whatever fate awaited him, was totally unacceptable. The Captain of the Excalibur had never left anyone behind. While filling that role, John had no intention of breaking that record. The XO pulled himself together. He didn't want Lily to share his fears and his distress. He told himself that this was far worse for her than it was for him. She needed him to be strong for her.

John reached out with his mind and caressed Lily gently, then sent to her, softly. *[/Can you still link to Demon? Or is it too far?]*

Lily turned to face him, her incredible green eyes full of pain. She had desperately wanted to go to the children when they returned to the ship, but John had asked her to join him on the bridge, knowing that

she could be his only hope of making contact with Gideon. Lily had agreed, despite the pain she felt, and she now stood by him, waiting to help in any way she could. John didn't think he had ever loved her more than in that moment, when she faced losing so much but still somehow found the strength to help him.

Lily closed her eyes, and John could feel her reaching out to her sister. While he couldn't listen in on whatever mental 'band' the sisters used in their link, he could tell when they were in contact. He felt Lily's mind link to Demon's, and a moment later, Lily opened her eyes and whispered, "I told them we were safe. Demon says she'll tell Luke, and she says they are unhurt. They've been put in a cell and left there for a while. They don't know what will happen next. Angel has had something done to her, they don't know quite what, but something is controlling her. I can't link to her, and neither can Demon." Tears rolled down Lily's face as she spoke, but somehow she kept going. "Demon says that she thinks the Centauri will kill them all."

John was about to reach out to touch Lily's mind, to try to comfort her, when he saw her close her eyes once more and felt her link to Demon. A moment later, Lily spoke again, "Matthew wants to know what you are doing. I told Demon about you telling the Emperor that he would be at war with the ISA if he killed them. Just a minute..." Lily paused, then her face set in anger. "Matthew says we should leave them!"

Matheson leaped to his feet. "Tell him that there's no way I'll leave here before I have to! Tell him that I'm in command of this ship now, not him!" John was outraged that his Captain and friend would even think that they would leave him behind.

He watched as Lily sent back the message to Demon, and her face showed all the pain she felt at the response she had to pass on. "Matthew says you have to put the safety of the three hundred people here, before the four of them down there." Her eyes opened again, and the look she gave John nearly broke his heart. "Demon agrees with him. She asked me to take care of Marcus for her, then she cut me off. She won't answer me now. I think she wants to spend the time she has left with Matthew. Oh goddess, what are we going to do, John? How can we live without them?"

John took Lily into his arms, ignoring every rule in the book in the face of her grief and need, and his own. "I don't know, but I'm going to do everything I can to stop that happening."

They stood in silence for a moment, drawing comfort from each other, but then their mental and emotional communion was interrupted. The Communications Officer turned in her seat and spoke, "Commander, we're being signaled, but I can't pin down the source."

Luke quickly wiped the tears from his face as the door to the cell was flung open and a guard entered, pointing a gun at them, and signaling them to walk ahead of him. It was an almost welcome interruption to the intense emotions that had swirled around the cell in the aftermath of Demon's words. Luke had watched, as she and Gideon had stood motionless, holding each other tightly, taking what comfort they could from each other's presence. In one way, Luke was jealous that they had each other at these last moments, while he was facing death alone. But he was glad that neither John nor Lily was there with him. He would rather die alone than know that they were going to die with him. So he both envied Demon and Matthew and pitied them.

While he had held Demon's hand as they had sat together, Luke had been careful to guard and control his emotions, knowing that the physical contact would make it much harder for Demon to block, and Luke didn't want her to pick up on his reactions. He didn't much like his feelings, and didn't want anyone else to know how much anger and fear he was experiencing.

The anger arose from many things. Luke was angry with the Centauri for doing this to them, he was angry with Angel for having precipitated this crisis, he was angry with Demon for having come back when she could be safe with her sister and son on board the Excalibur. Luke was angry because it seemed that Demon cared more for Gideon than she did for her sister and her son, and in his view that was wrong for any parent. [But be honest with yourself, if you'd had to choose between John or Lily and the children, what would you have done?] Luke pushed the question aside, not wanting to know the answer, and focused his attention on the last aspect of his anger. He was angry with Gideon for having agreed to let him come back to the palace, [Why couldn't he have said no? If he had, I wouldn't be here!]

Luke sighed deeply; he knew that all those issues were just ways to deal with his underlying anger with the universe for doing this to him, to John and to Lily. Was happiness not allowed? Three people had somehow found each other across space and time, and created a small, deep pool of happiness, so the universe had to come along and destroy it. Luke was furious that he was going to die, but even angrier as he knew that John and Lily were going to have to live with all their losses. How would Lily go on without her sisters? How would John deal with losing his Captain and best friend? How would they both handle losing their lover? Luke was outraged at the unfairness of it all.

There was only one minor consolation as far as Luke was concerned. At least being angry at anything and everything kept the fear at bay. Because he was very frightened indeed of the death that awaited him.

As the guard gestured for them to leave, Demon reached out and took Luke's hand, squeezing it as she smiled bravely, her face still wet with tears. "If you could say something to John and Lily now, what would it be?"

Luke felt all the anger and fear drain out of him at the prospect of being able to send one last message to his lovers. He fought to keep control as he whispered, "Just that I love them, and a short life with them was far better than a long life without them."

He watched as Demon closed her eyes and nodded, then she straightened and looked from Luke to Matthew and back, holding their hands tightly, saying, "Let's not go gentle into that good night. Let's show the bastards." Luke could only admire her bravery and was determined to match it.

Gideon laughed at Demon's misquote and lifted her hand to kiss it. "Definitely with a bang, not a whimper."

Luke groaned theatrically, covering his emotions. "Mangling Dylan Thomas I can cope with, but did you have to maul Eliot? Personally, I'll go along with Peter Pan, 'To die will be an awfully big adventure.' Let's go have some awfully big adventures." The guard gestured with his rifle again and the three of them left the cell, hand in hand, marching defiantly to the throne room.

They arrived to find that other than the guards, only the Emperor and Angel were present. The Drakh had left. Mollari was slumped back onto his throne, while Angel huddled in a heap at his feet. As they entered, she looked up and cried, "I'm so sorry! This is all my fault." Just from the expression of pain on her face, Luke could see that Angel was herself again.

Luke let go of Demon's hand as she dragged herself away and across to her sister, throwing herself to the ground and taking Angel into her arms, hugging and rocking her. Gideon turned to Mollari and asked, "Is she cured?"

The Emperor shook his head, slurring his words as he spoke. "Only temporarily. There is no cure for the sickness that afflicts us both, only occasional temporary relief." He went on to explain the effect of alcohol on the Keepers, and how he and Angel only had a few moments of freedom. Luke watched as Demon's face fell on hearing the news, and she went back to rocking her sister, and stroking her hair.

Mollari went on, "Speaking of cures, I have a proposition for you, Captain. I can only speak freely for a little while, then my Keeper will resume control, so you had better decide quickly." He waved at the guards standing around the room. "They are all deaf mutes, so will know nothing about our agreement." Mollari struggled upright in his throne. "One of the things the Drakh hold over me is the threat of the same plague they used on Earth. They say if they don't have my full cooperation, they will release the plague on this planet. They have other weapons against us, but this is my greatest fear."

The Emperor looked imploringly at Gideon. "I know you found a viral screen that prevents infection and released it into the Earth's atmosphere. I know that this screen has been tailored for every race and planet in the ISA, to remove all future threat of infection by the Drakh. Give me this screen, Captain, and I will save your wife and the doctor."

Luke's stomach flipped. Was this possible? Was there a way out of this? Might he have a life with John and Lily to look forward to after all? Perhaps the universe wasn't so unkind; perhaps love wasn't such a crime against nature as he'd thought. Luke watched, as Gideon looked puzzled. "Why didn't you ask before? You could have had that data any time you wanted it."

Mollari sighed. "Because my Keeper and my allies would not want us to have access to it. I can only ask while my Keeper sleeps. And please, remember my other request. Find G'Kar and send him to me, soon. Now do we have a deal, Captain?"

Before Gideon could respond, Demon spoke. "What about Angel? And Matthew?" She still held Angel in her arms, hugging her sister tightly. Luke was appalled at the hope so clearly displayed in her expression, as he feared that she could only be disappointed.

The old Centauri looked at Demon sadly. "There is a limit to what I can do. The Keeper will always control your sister; you cannot remove it. When you have gone, I will have her killed, quickly and painlessly." Demon's face showed her dismay at his words, and she hugged Angel even closer as Mollari continued, "Believe me, my dear, when I tell you that it will be a mercy for her. And I cannot protect the Captain from my allies. They are determined to have their revenge upon him. Again, the best I can offer is a quick and painless death." He turned back to look at Gideon. "Do you accept, Captain? Decide quickly, before the Keepers awake."

Gideon turned to Demon and carefully pulled her away from Angel, until she stood before him. Luke could see that Demon was torn; she didn't want to be taken from her sister, but she clearly longed to be held by her husband. Gideon hugged her tightly then kissed her forehead, before saying softly, "I heard everything you said earlier, and I know how hard this is going to be for you. In some ways, I have the easier option. Deborah, I love you so much, I can't bear the thought of you dying when I could save you. Please, go with Luke and try to find a way to live. For Marcus. Live for our son."

Luke was startled when Demon sobbed and lowered her head to Gideon's shoulder, her icy control deserting her at last. It seemed that she could be brave in the face of death, but her bravery was insufficient to face life alone. Demon clung to her husband, desperately, sobbing his name and refusing to go. Waves of grief, loss and guilt washed over the occupants of the room as she lost control over her emotions. Gideon looked over her shoulder at Luke, silently begging for his help. Luke moved forward and

took one of Demon's arms, dragging it away from Gideon, as the Captain took her other arm and freed himself from her grasp. Luke glanced down to see that Angel had curled into a ball on the floor, apparently no longer aware of anything going on around her.

Demon started to scream as Luke tried to drag her away from Gideon, and her struggles became increasingly violent with every step they took. Gideon's face showed his pain as he watched his wife become hysterical at being taken away from him, feeling the strength of her grief as she was dragged away. Mollari gestured to his guards, and Luke suddenly found that he had help in restraining Demon who was now shrieking, totally distraught.

Luke could feel every bit of her pain but could barely make out Demon's words as he and the guards dragged her, inch by inch, toward the door. "No...you said you'd never leave me...you can't do this...I won't let them...I can't live without you...Matthew, stop them...help me, Matthew, please, help me." Her projections were becoming unbearable, and Luke could see that even the Centauri guards were struggling with the emotional overload Demon was sending. Only Angel seemed unaffected as she remained, curled into a fetal position, at the foot of the throne.

Looking back at Gideon, Luke could see he was in agony. He stood rigidly, his fists clenched at his sides as Luke and the guards fought with Demon, trying to take her away. She was fighting like a woman possessed, and Luke and all the guards together were having difficulty restraining her as she tried to get back to her husband. Luke told himself over and over that he was doing this for her own good, and for the sake of her child, but Demon's screams for Matthew were heartbreaking, and her projections of grief never stopped as she fought.

Somehow, Luke lost his grasp of her arm and found himself thrown backward as Demon lurched out of the guards hold. She ran back across the room, throwing herself into Gideon's arms and clinging to him, begging him not to send her away, to let her stay with him, to let her die with him. Her words were like a stake through Luke's heart as she begged her husband, "Please don't send me away. Please, Matthew, let me stay, I can't leave you, I need you, don't let them take me away."

Gideon pulled his wife back into his arms and held her tightly, burying his head into her hair. Luke barely heard his whispered words. "I love you so much. I can't bear to see you die. Please, Deborah, do this for me. It's the last thing I'll ever ask of you. Don't die for me, live for me."

The words ran through Demon like an electric shock. Luke saw her shudder in Gideon's arms and go rigid. The waves of emotion ceased abruptly, and an eerie silence descended on the room as Demon stood unbending in front of her husband, seemingly frozen in place. In the total stillness that followed, Luke saw from the corner of his eye that Mollari was moving to pick up one of the rifles his guards had dropped when they went to help Luke restrain Demon.

The Emperor lifted the gun, pointed it directly at Demon and Gideon and laughed softly, his face frozen back into an expressionless mask. "If you want to die, my dear, that is easily arranged, but I think I'll kill your husband first. Not quickly, of course. Perhaps I'll start by shooting his leg off." The Keeper was back in control.

Mollari lowered the sights of the rifle and pointed it at Gideon's leg, as Angel sat upright and watched, her face changing, her lips spreading into a malicious smile. Luke felt



sick as he watched Angel's Keeper reassert its control over her.

His attention was snapped back to Demon as she shrieked. The word was, "NOOOO!!!!!" but as she screamed her voice changed. From Demon's voice, albeit distorted by pain and grief, the tone modulated, became deeper, and echoed around the room. Luke watched in horror as her head went back and her mouth opened wide, to let a bright, white light escape.

The light shot from her mouth and eyes, three streams of unbearable brightness, which coalesced into a single entity. It was a form that Luke had never seen before, totally non-humanoid, something with multiple limbs and tentacles. As Mollari's finger tightened on the trigger, the white light lashed out at him, ripping the rifle from his grasp and throwing it to the far side of the room.

The Emperor's expression changed to one of fear as the entity of light towered above him, looming over him, then striking him with another of its limbs. The tip struck his shoulder at the base of his neck, and a smell of burning flesh filled the room. Mollari screamed and collapsed, clutching his neck where the alien form had attacked him. Almost simultaneously, another tentacle struck at Angel, in exactly the same place, her scream overlapping with Mollari's as she too collapsed to the ground, holding her neck, writhing in pain.

Luke pulled himself from the floor, unable to properly grasp what had happened in such a short space of time. He threw himself across the room toward Angel, half aware that Gideon had grabbed Demon as she fell to her knees, after the light being had left her. It swirled around above their heads, and as the guards ran to pick up their rifles, it struck them all at the same moment, having sufficient tentacles to take them all down together. As it struck, the guards dropped like stones. Luke wasn't sure whether they were stunned or dead, but he didn't have time to check right now.

He reached Angel and pulled her into his arms, wishing he could shield himself from the appalling shrieking noise the entity had been making ever since it left Demon's body, and from the bright, white glare it emitted. Luke could barely see what he was doing as he pulled the shoulder strap of Angel's dress to one side, and saw the terrible burn the thing had made when it struck her. The doctor part of his mind catalogued the damage and made a note that she would need skin grafts on the wound, while the rest of him laughed, almost hysterically. [As if we're likely to get that opportunity! Face it, Luke, chances are you're still going to die in this room. If the Centauri don't kill you, the light thing probably will!] But at least Angel was alive. He could feel her pulse and see her chest rising and falling with each breath. Whatever the entity had done to her, it hadn't killed her.

The screaming noise started to fade and the entity's spasmodic circling seemed to be slowing, now that only Luke, Demon and Gideon remained uninjured. Luke looked over at Gideon and Demon, wondering whether Demon was unharmed after all. She was collapsed in Gideon's arms, seemingly unconscious, as the Captain yelled frantically at her, shaking her in his attempts to wake her.

The light seemed to condense itself above the spot where Gideon held Demon, and Luke barely had chance to yell out a warning as it swooped back down and struck Demon directly in the middle of her forehead. Gideon tried to drag his wife out of its path, but the light followed as he moved her, fixing itself firmly to her head. For a moment, it hung in the air above Demon, then it seemed to vanish back inside her, absorbed into her skull.

The throne room became completely silent and Luke stared at Gideon as he sat on the floor, with Demon resting in his arms. Gideon stared back at Luke, sitting in much the same position, holding Angel.

The Captain spoke hoarsely. "What the fuck was that?"

Gideon looked down into his wife's chalk white face and shook her gently. "Come on, Deborah, wake up." He leaned forward to kiss her lips gently, while an inner voice said, [And who the hell do you think you are? Prince Valiant? She's not Sleeping Beauty, you know. She's not going to wake up just because you kiss her.] Gideon found he didn't care and told the inner voice to shut up. He kissed Deborah again and shook her. "Come on, sweetheart, I've got to get you out of here, and you know I can't carry you for more than a few steps. Wake up for me now, will you?"

He sighed with relief as Deborah's eyes started to flutter, and he could see she was coming round. Looking over at where Luke held Angel, Gideon asked, "How is she? Did that thing hurt her badly?" He continued to stroke Deborah's cheek as she gradually came to.

Luke looked worried as he examined Angel's neck. "It gave her a severe burn, and I need to get her treatment as quickly as possible, but she's alive. She's unconscious at the moment, and I hope she stays that way for a while, as the burn will be agonizing when she wakes up." Gideon watched as Luke looked over at Mollari and said, "We ought to get him some help, Captain. He's hurt as badly as Angel."

Gideon shook his head regretfully. "Not until we're out of this place. If we can make it back to the ship before anyone spots us, we'll call for help from there, but that's a big 'if'. This place is full of guards, and the rooms are like a rabbit warren. I have no idea how to get out of here without being caught, but I'm going to have a damned good try."

The Captain helped Deborah to her feet, and held her up as she wobbled. He could see that her eyes were glazed and unfocused, and he wondered what the light thing had done to her. Gideon pushed aside all concerns and questions, focusing on the most critical issue for that moment. Escape. Turning to Luke, he asked, "Can you carry Angel?" He let go of his wife and grabbed one of the rifles from the floor, slinging the rifle over his shoulder before going back to put his arm around her.

Luke nodded and lifted Angel easily, making sure that her head rested against his shoulder, so her neck wasn't damaged further. Gideon turned to Deborah and found she was looking at him glassily, but at least she now seemed aware of what was going on around her. She licked her lips to moisten them and whispered, "What happened? What was that thing? Where did it come from and where did it go?"

Gideon was searching for an answer when a voice spoke from behind the drapes of the throne. "That was a Vorlon, I think. And you seem to be carrying it inside you."



*A short, slightly chubby Centauri stepped out hesitantly from behind the curtains. Gideon lifted his rifle and pointed it at the newcomer, who raised his hands as he stuttered, "Don't, please, it's all right, I'm not one of them, well, I mean, I am one of them, I'm a Centauri, obviously, but I'm not one of *them*, if you know what I mean."*

Gideon sent a silent prayer that the Centauri would learn to get on with what he wanted to say, and kept his own response brief. "No. I don't know what you mean." He kept the rifle firmly pointing at the Centauri's stomach.

"I'm Vir Cotto. I'm the Ambassador on Babylon 5, well, I am when I'm there, but I'm not there right now, obviously. But before I was made Ambassador I was Londo's aide." Vir pointed at the Emperor as he slumped against the steps of the throne and looked sad. "He wasn't always this way. He still isn't, not all the time. Sometimes he tries to help people, tries to do good things, but they won't let him. You know who they are, don't you? The Drakh? They control him a lot of the time, so he can't help it, he can't help himself. Only G'Kar can help him now, he told you that, didn't he? That you have to find G'Kar and get him to come here? That's the only thing we can do for him now, we have to find G'Kar."

Gideon sighed. It was one of those days when none of his prayers were being answered. He glanced quickly at the guards, who fortunately showed no sign of consciousness. Keeping the gun aimed at Vir he asked, "If you're not one of them, can you help us find a way out of this place?"

Vir nodded frantically. "Yes, I can get you out without anyone seeing you. In fact, that's why I'm here. Londo called me when he was drunk and asked me to come to take the doctor and your wife away. But I can't get a shuttle to take you back to the ship, only Londo could do that." The short Centauri wrung his hands in distress as his inability to carry out his orders. "Londo had given instructions to the local sensor station to look the other way if your shuttle took off, but he hadn't ordered another shuttle, and now no one can do that, so it doesn't matter that the sensor people won't be looking as we don't have a shuttle for you to escape on."

Gideon waved him into silence, saying, "That's OK, you get us to somewhere a shuttle can land undetected, and I can fix the transport. What are the landing coordinates?" He wasn't entirely happy about trusting this Centauri, but didn't see that they had a lot of choice at that moment. What Vir had told him about the sensor stations certainly explained why John had got the shuttle away so easily. The Centauri sensor operators had been told to ignore it. As Vir gave him the coordinates he needed, Gideon used the rifle to gesture him towards the exit, and put his free arm around Deborah's waist, holding her to his side. He whispered into her ear, "Can you link to Lily? Get John to send a shuttle down and tell him the landing co-ordinates."

Deborah nodded, and although she was still pale, Gideon could see that she seemed to be recovering from the shock of what had happened. Whatever that was. He shook his head, deciding that the puzzle would have to wait. For now, they just needed to get out.

Vir paused as Luke started to follow them with Angel in his arms. "You should leave her behind. She's one of them now."

Deborah started to protest and Luke joined her. Gideon waved them both into silence. "Why do you say that? Isn't that why the light thing...the Vorlon attacked them? To destroy the things that controlled them."

Vir shook his head sadly. "They grow back. They're attached at the shoulder and the Vorlon may have burned them away, but they always grow back. Within a few hours, both Londo and the girl will be back under their control. If you must take her with you, keep her unconscious, but it would be better to leave her behind. We'll..." Vir looked distressed as he searched for the right words. "We'll take care of her."

Gideon had no doubt what that phrase meant in this context. "No way. I'm not leaving anyone behind. We all go out together." He gestured Vir to lead the way and for Luke to follow, but hung back slightly as he turned to Deborah and asked, "Any luck?"

Deborah nodded, but looked puzzled. "John says that the Calvary is on its way. Surely that should be the

cavalry, shouldn't it? Why did he insist on the message being 'Calvary'?"

Gideon laughed, remembering when he'd said those words to Max. 'This is the Calvary, Mr. Eilerson, we'd like to ride to the rescue...' He kissed Deborah's cheek and urged her forward to follow the others. "John has a long memory and a wicked sense of humor. Now let's not get left behind." He steered her through the maze of dark corridors, following Vir closely.

After a few minutes, Gideon could see that Luke was tiring and gave him the gun while he took Angel. Deborah walked silently beside him, looking sadly down at her sister, then whispered, "Do you think we can help her, Matthew? What will we do if that thing does grow back?"

Gideon shook his head as he looked down at the young woman he carried. "I don't know, but I'm sure that Luke and his people will do everything they can for her."

A few more moments passed in silence as they wove their way from one darkened room to the next. Gideon began to be concerned that perhaps Vir was leading them into a trap of some kind, when they emerged onto a terrace overlooking the palace gardens. Night had fallen while they were inside, and the darkness was near absolute. A few lights were scattered around the gardens, but it was mainly black outside. The only sounds came from the sea gently lapping on the shore and a few night calling animals.

The Centauri led them into the shrubbery and onto the darkened paths. Gideon could barely see Luke's back in front of him, and was glad of the feel of Deborah's hand on his arm. At least that way, he knew she was still with him. The Captain was worried by how quiet Deborah had been since she came around, and wished he'd had the time to check her properly. He was particularly concerned that she hadn't shown any reaction to Vir's comment that it was a Vorlon she was carrying around inside her.

Gideon knew that when he had time to think about that, it would blow him away. [My wife has a Vorlon in her head? All this time, there have been three of us in bed together?] The concept was disconcerting to say the least. His fear was that Deborah would find it rather more than disconcerting; she would be deeply distressed. Gideon told himself that he'd deal with it later when they had time, and continued to follow Luke down the almost invisible path.

He sensed rather than saw the shrubbery end as they entered a more open space, but the darkness seemed deeper than ever. The night was overcast, and there weren't even stars to provide minimal illumination as they emerged into the open. Gideon nearly jumped out of his skin, and came close to dropping Angel, as a voice spoke in his ear.

"Stuck up another tree, Matthew? This is becoming a habit."

Closing Arguments

Galen smiled as the Captain spun around at the sound of his words, but the smile faded as the Technomage saw the burden Matthew carried. Galen's enhanced vision enabled him to see clearly in the darkness, and he was distraught when he saw Angel's unconscious body cradled in the Captain's arms. The Technomage reached out and gently took the girl from Matthew, then gave quiet orders for the others to follow him into his ship. As he walked up the ramp, he could hear the short Centauri protesting in whispers, but Galen knew that Matthew would ensure that he boarded.

As he walked through the darkened ship, Galen gazed down at the young woman in his arms. After years

of trying, he had schooled himself never to show the depth of his feelings for her, knowing that they would never be returned, but he still cared for her deeply. It was difficult for Galen to watch Angel when she looked at Matthew, as her fondness for the Captain was clear to see. Galen longed for her to look at him like that, but he knew it could never be.

Arriving in the area he set aside for visitors, Galen gently lowered Angel to a bunk, and watched as the doctor passed a rifle to Gideon, then moved to tend the girl. Demon sat on the other side of the bunk, taking her sister's hand and stroking her hair. Raven looked up at Galen and asked, "Do you have anything I can use to treat her? Anything I can use on her burns?"

The Technomage passed the doctor a basic medical kit of the kind the Excalibur used. He was reluctant to share anything more advanced until he was sure of the doctor's ability to use it, and knew the extent of Angel's injuries. Galen could see the severe burns on her shoulder and neck and wondered what had caused them. Another mystery to be solved later, but for now more urgent matters required his attention.

*Galen watched the doctor for a moment, then turned to find Matthew watching him closely. The Captain smiled and said, "I think it's fair to say that this time you were most wanted *and* most needed. Thanks for coming. How did you get past the Centauri sensors?"*

The Technomage waved the query away. "I'll explain later. Suffice it to say that Alwyn borrowed a piece of technology that the sisters used to conceal his ship on Eriadne, and he adapted it for our own use. Comes in very handy, when we don't wish to be detected." Galen turned his attention to the short Centauri who stood, wringing his hands, behind Matthew. "We meet again, Vir Cotto. Are you still the brave, determined little man I met years ago?"

Vir's mouth opened and closed several times, but the only noises that emerged were fragments of words as he made many false starts, before lapsing back into silence. Galen watched as Matthew turned to the Centauri and spoke, "Thank you for your help, Vir. Will you come with us? It might not be safe for you to go back, having helped us. I'm sure that President Sheridan would be happy to make arrangements for you to live on Minbar if you want."

Vir shook his head vehemently. "I can't leave Londo. He needs me, although he'd say he doesn't. Anyway, I've lived on Minbar, when Londo sent me away before, and look what a mess he got himself into then. I have to go back. He has to have someone he can trust, when he's not under their control. Remember what he asked though. Remember to ask Sheridan and Deleenn to find G'Kar and send him here. That's Londo's only hope. Find G'Kar."

The Centauri's face had fallen into sadness as he spoke, so Galen asked, "Why is it so important to find this Narn? What can he do that no one else can do for the Emperor?"

Vir swallowed hard as he answered. "He can free Londo. Only G'Kar can do that, only G'Kar can free him from his Keeper." He looked pleadingly from Galen to Gideon and back, "You will ask them won't you?"

Gideon nodded and held out his hand to the Centauri. Vir took it and grasped it firmly as Gideon asked, "Is there anything else we can do?"

Vir paused, looking hopefully from the Captain to the Technomage, then said, "Could you ask Deleenn to get the Rangers to make contact with me? There's an underground network here in Centauri Prime trying to fight the Drakh, and we need help. Would that be too much to ask?"

Gideon smiled and promised to pass the message on. Galen watched in silence as the Centauri turned and started to leave, but then hesitated and turned back. "Just one last favor? When I was on Babylon 5, Delenn had an aide. His name was Lennier, and he was my friend. We used to cheer each other up when our Ambassadors behaved impossibly. He became a Ranger and we lost touch. I'd like to know if my old friend Lennier is well. Can you ask that for me?"

Galen answered before Matthew could speak. "We will do what we can, Vir Cotto, to meet all your requests. You are still braver than you look, and such loyalty to your friends will surely be rewarded one day."

Vir looked embarrassed and started to wring his hands again, saying, "If the prophecies are right, I have a reward coming that you wouldn't believe! But I'm not sure if it's really a reward, I mean some people would think it is, but then again, some others might think it's a punishment, but on the whole I suppose that most people would think becoming the next Emperor was a reward, don't you think?"

Galen blinked several times as he unscrambled the last sentence, not sure if he had heard it right. "Emperor? You?"

Vir nodded frantically. "Yes, me! Silly, isn't it?" With those words he turned and rushed away, leaving Galen and Gideon staring open mouthed after him.

Galen pulled himself together, unwilling to let anyone see how disconcerted he was by the idea of Vir becoming Emperor, but he suspected that it was too late. Matthew had seen the unflappable Technomage well and truly flapped. Galen cleared his throat. "Perhaps we had better get back to the Excalibur before we receive any more startling revelations or surprises. Unlike the White Queen, I really can only believe *one* impossible thing before breakfast."

Gideon smiled as the Technomage removed a ball of light from a pocket and whispered to it. It had been a while since he'd seen Galen rattled, and he had to admit that he enjoyed the sight, no matter how mean-spirited that enjoyment was. The ball Galen held intrigued the Captain. It was remarkably similar to Angel's ball of sight, and Gideon wondered if it could perform the same function. If it could, it would explain the Technomage's apparent omniscience on many subjects. For the moment, Galen seemed to be using it as a ship's control, giving it orders to take the ship back to the Excalibur.

As Galen finished his instructions, he looked up and smiled at Gideon, saying, "A useful toy, but you'll excuse me while I ensure that our return to your ship is trouble free." With that, the Technomage turned and swept out of the area, his long black coat swirling behind him. Gideon shook his head, then turned back to the bunk where Luke and Deborah sat with Angel.

The young witch was still unconscious, and the doctor was using a med kit regenerator to treat the worst of the burns. He looked up as Gideon approached and asked, "How is she?"

Luke sighed, "I wish I knew. The burns should heal nicely, although a skin graft will speed things up, and I can remove this scar at the same time." The doctor ran his finger gently down the line of a scar that ran across Angel's shoulder, then looked across at Deborah who sat on the other side of the bunk, holding Angel's hand. When Gideon glanced at his wife, he was surprised to see her blushing and wondered why a reference to Angel's scar would cause her to react like that.

Demon whispered, "No, leave it. It's a reminder to us both."

Gideon wondered briefly what memory it provoked, but was distracted when Luke continued, "What I don't know and won't be able to find out until I get her back to Medbay, is how much internal damage has been done. There are signs that something attached itself to her, and something was implanted in her. I don't know what it was and I don't know whether any of it is left. The burn the light-being gave her may have cauterized whatever it was, but then again..." Luke paused and looked from Deborah to Gideon and back to his patient, before going on, "What did Vir mean when he said it grows back? I need to get her to Medbay, Captain, as fast as possible."

Gideon nodded and moved round the bunk to join his wife. "I think Galen is taking care of that right now." Arriving at Deborah's side, he reached down and took her free hand. Gideon was concerned about how subdued his wife had been since she came round. Since Vir's announcement that she was carrying a Vorlon inside her, she had said very little, doing what Gideon asked of her and staying with her sister, but appearing withdrawn and passive, behavior that was quite uncharacteristic. Gideon was hoping it was the aftermath of shock, but his fear was that it was something deeper, more fundamental.

Deborah glanced up as Gideon took her hand, but her face remained expressionless. Her hand lay limp in his, not responding to the quick squeeze of reassurance he gave. She moved her gaze to his hand, still holding hers, then back to her sister. Gideon couldn't think of another time when Deborah hadn't responded in some way to his touch. His fears grew.

He squeezed Deborah's hand again to regain her attention, then pulled her to her feet. Putting his arm around her waist, Gideon steered her across the darkened area, away from the bunk. Deborah allowed him to move her, but gazed back over her shoulder at her sister. Her face still showed no emotion of any kind, but Gideon could tell that she didn't want to leave Angel. So why didn't she resist? Why didn't she tell him to leave her alone, to leave her with her sister? Deborah had never been reticent about expressing her wishes before.

Gideon stopped a few paces away from the bunk and turned his wife to face him. She gazed at him steadily, but looking into her eyes, Gideon couldn't see the usual warmth that lit Deborah's face from within. [It looks like the shutters are down and no one is home.] Placing his hands on her shoulders, Gideon shook her gently. "Deborah? Talk to me. How do you feel? Are you OK?"

Deborah blinked a few times then spoke slowly, "I...I think so. I feel a little strange that's all. Has that thing always been inside me?" Her eyes slowly focused on Gideon's, but he was still concerned to see how vacant she looked.

"I don't know. If it hasn't, I don't know where it came from. At the moment, I'm just glad it was there, and that it came out when it did. It...you saved us all, Deborah." Gideon pulled Deborah close and kissed her, but she didn't respond. He leaned back to look at her, and her face was as expressionless as before.

Deborah looked at Gideon and lifted her hand to touch her own lips, then examined her fingers, almost as if she were looking for some trace of his kiss to be left there. She looked up at him again and whispered. "I don't think I know who I am any more. I need some time to think this through. Give me a little time, Matthew, please."

Gideon stepped back and released Deborah's arms, watching as she went back to sit on the bunk next to her sister and Luke. He was troubled by her reaction, her withdrawal, and her apparent inability to deal with what had happened to them all. It was totally uncharacteristic of Deborah, who always looked every

problem directly in the eye and tackled it head on. The Captain told himself it was just shock. [That's all it is. Give her the time she just asked for, and she'll be fine. Of course she'll be fine. She has to be...] He refused to let himself think about what it could mean for him and his son if she wasn't.

The Captain suddenly wondered if it was only his wife who carried an alien around inside her. Would her sisters also hold parts of a Vorlon? Looking over to where Angel lay unconscious, Gideon shook his head. [No, not Angel at least.] If Angel had been carrying a Vorlon, it would never have allowed a Keeper to be attached to her. But Lily? Was that how Lily was able to block telepaths so successfully? How could they be certain if she did or she didn't? Gideon had no idea how they could find out, but he suspected that the little redhead would find the idea as distressing as Deborah obviously did.

[And just how would you react to finding that you had an alien in your head?] Gideon thought to himself. He suspected that he'd do anything and everything to get the damned thing out as soon as he possible could. The Captain promised himself that he'd help Deborah do just that as soon as he knew how.

His attention was attracted back to the door when Galen reentered the room. The Technomage went straight to the bunk and asked Luke how Angel was, before he turned to Gideon. "We're nearly back to the Excalibur. If I call and let them know we're coming in, the Centauries might pick up the communication, and they could attack. Commander Matheson advised me that your wife could make contact with her sister, without being detected. We need her to tell your First Officer that we are arriving."

Gideon looked at Galen, and sighed. The feud between the Technomage and the sisters never really died, it just went dormant for long periods, waiting to flare up when most inconvenient. "She has a name, Galen, and you could ask her yourself. She's not deaf."

Galen raised his eyebrows and said nothing, so Gideon went to Deborah and passed on the request. Deborah closed her eyes as she contacted Lily, then spoke softly. "John says the landing bay doors are open, and could we please get inside as quickly as possible. Things are hotting up outside, and he'd hate to have to slam the barn doors shut before all the little lost sheep have come home." The words came out in a monotone, with none of Deborah's usual humor.

Gideon watched as Galen left to take them home, then turned to look at his wife, more worried than ever.

Gideon ran down the ramp from Galen's ship, staggering as the Excalibur shook under fire, her hull ringing with the impacts of the shots she was taking. He took a second to hug Lily where he found her waiting outside the landing bay doors, then turned to Jackson, who was also waiting there and they ran together to the bullet car tube. Jackson briefed her Captain as they ran, then completed her situation update as the bullet car carried them to the bridge.

Gideon stripped unselfconsciously as they traveled, and threw the dress uniform to one side, pulling on his standard black pants and jacket, with a red T-shirt, all of which Jackson had waiting for him in the bullet car. He sighed with relief at being back to normal. [Well, as normal as you can be when in the middle of a fleet of attacking hostiles in enemy territory.] He staggered as he pulled on his pants, thrown to one side by the ferocity of the hits on his ship. [Give me a break will you? Even the Drakh wouldn't want me turning up on the bridge without my pants on!]

Departing the bullet car at a run, Gideon and Jackson burst onto the bridge seconds later. Commander Matheson slid out of the center seat as Gideon arrived, allowing his Captain to see the latest position on

the command console beside the chair. This and Jackson's briefing brought Gideon right up to date. The situation was grim, but could have been far worse.

A total of thirty-five ships of assorted sizes, not counting fighters, surrounded the Excalibur at various distances. Of those, eleven were engaged in a direct attack on Gideon's ship, which had started shortly after Galen's ship had left Centauri Prime. Gideon assumed that either someone [the Drakh?] had found the Emperor and ordered the attack, or that Mollari had woken up and given the order himself. But in that case why weren't all of the surrounding ships attacking? While the Excalibur's guns and fighters were holding their own against their current attackers, she would soon have succumbed to an assault from the full fleet. So why were twenty-four of them sitting in space doing nothing? In fact, some of them were almost passively sabotaging their colleagues' efforts by slowly drifting into the line of fire between them and the Excalibur, forcing the attacking ships to break off. Even so, the Excalibur was taking the worst battering since the battle above Stryvstex, and Gideon knew that they couldn't take much more without severe damage and casualties. He had to find a way to get his ship and his people out of this mess.

Matheson pointed to the symbols representing the attacking ships. "We noticed something interesting on the scans, Captain." He staggered slightly by the side of Gideon's chair as a shot from outside struck the hull and rocked the whole ship. Grabbing the back of the chair, the Commander continued, "None of the



attacking ships have Centauri crew. They all seem to be controlled by one or two unknown entities." Gideon listened as he watched his fighters maneuvering into defensive positions around the ship, taking advantage of the barrage laid down by the forward and aft gun batteries, to sneak in and attack the Centauri fleet.

The pieces fell into place in Gideon's mind. The briefing he'd received from Sheridan had included highly confidential material that he had not been allowed to record into the ship's computers, or to share with his crew. Included in that briefing had been details of the biotech control pods recovered by Dr. Franklin several years before; left over Shadow tech that had been used in place of crew on Centauri ships. There was little doubt now as to who controlled those pods, and the Centauries' denial of any knowledge of the source of the technology was now proven to be a lie. The Centauri must have been working with the Drakh even then.

Gideon pushed that thought away to mull over later and report to Sheridan, while he focused on getting his ship back to Minbar in one piece. His people were performing miracles in keeping the enemy at bay, minimizing the damage, but it was about time that their Captain did his part.

"Ignore any ship that isn't firing at us. At worst, they're neutral. At best, they could be passive allies. Target all guns and fighter fire on those where we detect the control pods, and those actually firing on us." Checking the command console again, Gideon could see that Matheson had started moving the Excalibur toward the local jump gate, and that they were picking up speed. "Bring the jump engines on line. Change course and take us directly toward that part of the Centauri fleet that isn't controlled by the pods." Gideon pointed at a group of a dozen ships that were hanging back, taking no part in the firefight.

The Excalibur continued to rock with the force of the shots hitting her, and Gideon knew that not even her special Vorlon tech plasteel hull could take this punishment forever. He heard Matheson's warning, "Hull integrity down to 75%," and knew that he had to get his ship out of the battle as soon as possible, but he needed a way to stop the pod controlled ships from following immediately. Gideon flinched as a flare lit up

the viewscreen ahead, the brightness caused by one of his fighters exploding. Another of his crew lost because their Captain didn't act quickly enough. Gideon pushed away the guilt and concentrated on saving those he could. "Helm, maximum burn! Get us out from under those guns, before they take us apart!"

Matheson yelled, "Forward guns hit! We have a hull breach there, Captain. Evacuating the area." Gideon gritted his teeth and ordered the fighters to close the gap at the front of the ship and take over the targets the forward guns could no longer handle. He silently prayed that none of his crew had died of explosive decompression when the hull was breached.

The group of Centauri ships started to drift apart as they realized that the Excalibur was headed straight for them, but they moved slowly, sluggishly, apparently confused by the fact that the Excalibur was bearing down on them at full speed, but wasn't firing on them. Gideon ordered all his fighters to start closing in as they arrived in the middle of the Centauries, forcing a way through their tightly packed ranks, with the Centauri ships moving apart to avoid collision. The enemy was in close pursuit, although only nine attacking ships now survived. The fighters and rear guns had managed to take out two of the enemy, but at the cost of four more fighters.

The gamble seemed to be paying off, as none of the Centauri ships they were moving through made any attempt to fire on them. The heat of the battle cooled a little as the Excalibur forced their way through, giving Gideon and Matheson time to pull all their remaining fighters in close to the ship. Just as the Excalibur arrived at the far side of the Centauri pack, Gideon gave the order to jump.

The jump point opened and the Excalibur surged through, pulling its fighters through the point with it. Gideon had ordered maximum expansion of the point, and as they jumped into hyperspace, eight of the Centauri neutrals were dragged through behind them, directly into the path of the pursuing enemy ships.

"Full power to engines! Maximum burn!" Gideon wanted to put as much distance as he could between his ship and those behind him, while they untangled themselves from the mess he'd led them into. The nine attacking enemy ships had been forced to veer wildly off course as they'd jumped into hyperspace, to avoid colliding with their allies that had been dragged through behind the Excalibur. The enemy was scattered randomly, more immediately concerned with avoiding each other than with pursuing the Excalibur.

Gideon knew that he had bought them only a few moments of respite, and he needed to make the best use of it, to get as much distance from the enemy as possible. He was half surprised that the pod-controlled ships had not started firing on the Centauri ships that blocked their path to the Excalibur. He could only assume that they were programmed to recognize other Centauri ships as friendly, and had instructions not to fire on friendly targets.

The Captain watched the rear view closely as the Centauri ships sorted themselves out without any collisions, [Damn! I'd hoped to take another couple out!] and the nine real enemies started to pursue his ship. But the Excalibur was faster, and they gradually drew away, taking hits on the rear of the ship and on the phalanges, as the Centauri made one last attempt at stopping them, but without inflicting any serious damage. The Excalibur had escaped. [As long as the Centauri or the Drakh don't have ships waiting for us in hyperspace.]

Gideon had a back-up plan for that eventuality too. He gave the helm a set of co-ordinates in hyperspace, off the beacon, but not so far out as to lose themselves, where a hyperspace anomaly was located. Ordering helm to take them to that location as fast as the Excalibur could go, Gideon sat back in his chair and relaxed a little.

He listened to Matheson coordinating the repair efforts, and watched the damage reports coming up on his console. They had lost five fighters and Gideon mentally listed the names of every pilot lost, already starting to compose the letters he would send to their families in his head. [The basketball team will miss DeVito, and music nights won't be the same without G'Voth's bass in the barbershop quartet.] Gideon closed his eyes for a moment as he ran through the ways in which the others would be missed, then pulled his mind back to the immediate task: running as fast as they could, and repairing as much damage as possible before the next fight. Because he was sure that there would be another fight soon. He didn't believe they could get away this easily.

The Captain wondered briefly how Luke was doing with Angel, and allowed himself a moment to worry about Deborah. He wondered whether she was recovering from the shock of what had happened on the planet below, and hoped that taking care of Marcus during the battle would have helped bring her back from wherever she had gone in her head. He also hoped that Luke had found a little time to spend with Deborah, wishing he could have done the same himself, but knowing that his first duty was to his ship and his crew. [And she knows that, too. She understands.]

Gideon tried to convince himself that Deborah would recover quickly, then shook his head free of those concerns and focused again. He still had an enemy fleet in pursuit of his ship and they were a long way from home and safety, but he did have a plan. [A man without a plan is not a man. Who said that?] Gideon wondered as he watched his remaining fighters landing one by one on the flight deck.

{[Chapter 1](#)} {Chapter 2} {[Chapter 3](#)}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four P

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