

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four Q - Part 1: The Last Tango in Geneva

by *The Space Witches*



Matthew is not pleased with Luke.

Chapter 1

October 2272

Dr. Luke Raven was sitting at the desk in his Medbay office, his head leaning heavily in his hands, as he pondered the latest emergency. [This is a nightmare. It's impossible!] He sighed. Gideon had kept asking why the latest delivery of medical supplies was still cluttering up the flight deck weeks after they'd arrived. This afternoon he'd given Luke an ultimatum. Find a solution by tomorrow, 08:00 hours sharp, 'or else'. Given the fact that the Captain of the Excalibur hadn't been in the best of moods recently, Luke didn't want to find out what 'or else' might mean. Images of being asked to remove all his clothing before he stepped into an airlock came to mind. Gideon was a resourceful man, and he'd never let Luke's still serviceable clothes be sent off into the great void, not when someone else could wear them. [Hell, it's not my fault that we left before we were able to check on the delivery properly! If Gideon hadn't been in such a hurry to get away from Minbar, I'd have spotted the error before we left!]

He looked at the delivery slip again, but to his chagrin the numbers didn't change. The scale of the problem was appalling. Luke groaned. [Why did I have to think of scales at a time like this?] He looked at the numbers on the requisition again. They didn't change to the number he wanted to see. Not to the amount of 1,000 they had ordered, not even to 10,000. The number was still the same: 100,000. One hundred times as many as they'd ordered, and he'd been erring on the side of generosity in the original amount. What the hell was he supposed to do with 100,000 Drazi condoms?

"I know the Drazi have active libidos, but this is ridiculous!" Luke muttered under his breath, then leaned back in his chair and looked at the time, sighing again. His shift was almost over, and today of all days, he wanted to leave punctually. The twins were going to sleep in Angel's quarters tonight, so after putting Naima to bed, Lily, John and he would have some extra time to themselves--something they appreciated more than ever after Centauri Prime. [I have to find a place to store all these condoms! But where? I have every cubic millimeter of storage space full of medical supplies!]

Given that Drazi sexual organs were tucked under their armpits, the male sexual organs were lengthy and their condoms were rather large. Luke had only space enough for the 1,000 he'd ordered. [There's no one else who could use them and store them anywhere, is there?] He went through a mental list of departments, trying to come up with one that could find a use for the condoms, but came up with a blank, which didn't really surprise him. He'd already asked John, and if the Excalibur's XO couldn't come up with a taker for the condoms... Maybe 'come up' wasn't the best expression in the circumstances.

[Too bad I'm not a fashion designer. I'm sure that shirts with detachable latex sleeves aren't any crazier than the average designer's creations out here. They'd look better than those bellhop uniforms John showed me pictures of.] Luke stared up at his office ceiling. [OK, think laterally.] After some more thinking, he couldn't help but grin. [Hmmm, I could try and sell the Head of Catering on the new cucumber holders I've had delivered...] He chuckled and shook his head. [Get serious again! You want to live longer than tomorrow at 08:00 sharp. Lily will kill you if you get yourself thrown naked out of an airlock!]

Suddenly, Luke heard the door open. He looked up to see who it was, his face brightening with a smile when he saw Lily enter, as if thinking of his love had summoned her. [Hmm, I must try that more often. The power of positive thinking. Now, if I could just think 99,000 Drazi condoms off this ship...]

"Hey." He stood and crossed his office, drawing Lily into his arms to welcome her with a kiss, which Lily prolonged and deepened. When she finally let go of him, Luke asked, "So what are you doing here?" smiling down at her.

"Well, Angel just got the twins for their big night out," Lily grinned--Faylinn and Dasha had been very excited about staying with their auntie for the night, insisting that this was completely different than sleeping over in the Medbay crèche.

"I'm wondering who will create more mischief, the little children or the big child?" Luke said, smiling. "I'm glad she's making such good progress with her counselor."

"Thanks to your insistence that she should get herself some help." Lily smiled fondly up at him, but then her expression grew mournful. "But I'm worried about Demon. She seems to be withdrawing further all the time." Her emerald green eyes showed clearly how much her sister's state frightened and hurt her.

Luke pulled Lily tightly against his chest, kissing the top of her head. "I'm afraid she's just being Demon again, keeping everything in and refusing to let anyone help her. But we won't give up on her. We can't. We'll find a way to get through to her, I promise." He felt Lily squeeze him, expressing her gratefulness without speaking. "But enough of that now." As he looked out into the main room of Medbay, through the transparent inserts in the door, a grin crept onto his face. "I see you found a lot of someones to take care of our youngest."

*Lily looked around and laughed lightly as she watched the majority of Medbay staff cooing over Naima. "I'd say *they* found *us*--I'd barely set foot in there when they started flocking around." Luke could hear in*

her voice and see in the way she looked at her daughter how much Lily loved her.

[As we all do.] He smiled fondly when he saw Naima laugh at the antics of one of the nurses, then looked down at his lover again. "So you thought you'd come to take me home at the end of my shift?"

Lily turned to smile up at him. "Something like that."

Luke sighed. "I'm afraid that could still take a while. I have no idea how to get rid of these Drazi condoms before tomorrow 08:00, and I dread to think of what the Captain will do if I don't..."

Lily gently smiled up at him. "He's having a rough time. But I'm sure you'll find a solution. I will not let you spend the whole night here, Luke Raven." The look she gave him brooked no argument.

"Yes, Ma'am," Luke answered with a wry grin, "But then you'd better let me get back to work." After Lily released him from her embrace, he sat down at his desk again, and Lily made herself comfortable in one of the other chairs.

*While Luke searched through the Excalibur's database for *any* free space he could transfer the condoms to, he became aware that Lily had leaned forward, elbows resting on the desk's surface, her head leaning on her hands, offering Luke a very good view of her cleavage. With an effort, he managed to resist the distraction offered by this temptation, but after a while, he saw from the corner of his eye that Lily had lifted her head from her hands and crossed her arms on the desk, which had the effect of pushing her breasts together and up.*

Luke blinked and looked up at her, seeing a tiny grin on her lips. He narrowed his eyes. "What are you up to?"

Lily's eyes widened. "Me? I'm not up to anything..."

Luke suppressed a groan and tried to concentrate on the files on his computer screen again. For a while, Lily remained quiet, but suddenly she stood and moved behind him, starting to massage his neck and shoulders. Her fingers sent waves of warmth through his body, and he sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, as he felt his stiff muscles relax. "You are aware that I won't be able to finish, if you carry on doing that?" he murmured.

*Lily leaned forward, her breasts heavy against his shoulders, as she reached down with her right hand and gently squeezed his cock, which immediately sprang to life in her hands. "Oh, I hate to contradict you, but I think you *will* be able to finish..." Lily whispered into his ear, her purring voice sending shivers down his spine.*

Luke gasped. "Not here..."

*"Why not? Aren't you *up* for a little adventure?" Lily trailed kisses up and down the back of his neck, continuing to squeeze his hardening cock rhythmically. "Or do you think we'll be too *hard* on the furniture?"*

Luke knew when he'd lost. With an effort, he managed to keep his voice steady enough to set his office to privacy mode, which darkened the windows and would only open the door at his command or if an emergency code was given. He'd barely finished when he whirled around in his chair, grabbing Lily around her waist and pulling her tightly against him, then whirling back again, so she was trapped

between him and the desk. He looked up at her with a grin. "Horrible wench! You do your mystical namesake honor, trying to seduce innocent men..."

Lily's eyes widened, and she laughed her rippling laughter. "Innocent? Beneath that fair and calm surface," her index finger traced down his nose, "lie deep seas of darkness and depravity." Her finger moved along Luke's lips, and he bit it gently, kissing its tip while she continued. "As for my demonic spawn, I guess their fathers are a bad--or is that good?--influence on them, because they surely don't behave in very demon-like fashion, with the odd exception."

Luke grinned wickedly. "Well, John and I have to exert influence in some way, since we don't have anything else to say in this family."

Lily lifted her eyebrows, fingers running through Luke's dark blond hair. "It's not my fault that men are only good for one thing, and some not even for that." Before Luke could protest, she continued, "But fortunately..." Lily leaned closer, offering Luke her heaving bosom, "I found two specimens who are very good at it." She moaned softly, as Luke planted a kiss between her breasts, then started grazing his teeth over her exposed flesh. "But you know my memory, not much better than an average goldfish, so I need reminding just how good they are, rather often." Her eyes were burning with desire as she pulled his head back by his hair and her mouth came down on his in a bruising, passionate kiss.

Lily gasped for air when she finally released Luke's mouth. Sometime since initiating the kiss, she'd ended up sitting in his lap, straddling him, and she could feel his arousal against her groin. She'd only have to lift her skirt and open his fly... [But not yet.]

Sliding off Luke's lap and onto her knees, Lily gave him a promising smile. Reaching up, she opened the top three buttons of his shirt, then tore it open, revealing his smooth, almost hairless chest. It wasn't obvious, but Luke had become quite muscular since starting to work out with John. The doctor hadn't wanted to be completely helpless and a burden on his crewmates, should they ever get into hand-to-hand combat on an away mission.

As much as Lily liked looking at his muscles, she preferred to feel them. Pulling him closer, she met him halfway and with her lips, tongue and teeth, explored Luke's chest, paying special attention to his nipples, knowing how much it turned him on when she bit them gently. His reaction didn't disappoint her. She felt his low groan start deep inside his chest before she heard it rise through his throat, and his cock was twitching against her belly, as he pulled her even closer. Her mouth still clinging to Luke's chest, Lily shuffled backwards on her knees just enough so she could wedge her hands between their bodies to open the fly of Luke's pants, reaching inside to release his stiff cock from its confinement. She massaged it lightly with her hands, drawing gasps from him, while tracing her mouth down his chest, over his taut stomach, slowly but relentlessly nearing her ultimate goal.

Luke moaned when her lips enclosed the tip of his cock, and she let her tongue dance over and around it. She took him in farther, feeling him clench his hand in her hair as she grazed her teeth up his shaft when pulling back. Lily continued to tease him, using lips, tongue and teeth, until Luke pulled her head back by her hair. His brown eyes were dark with desire.

"Stop it. I don't want to come yet," he said in a low, breathless voice, "I want you on the desk."

Lily didn't need further incentive to scramble up from her position on the floor, halfway under Luke's desk, and to position herself on it.

As Luke stood and leaned closer, he slid his right hand under Lily's skirt and up the inside of her leg, sliding his fingers inside her as their lips met in a brief, heated kiss.

Lily threw her head back and moaned as he found that most sensitive spot inside her.

"This feels hot," Luke whispered in a raw voice.

"Well, why don't you slide your thermometer in and take a reading, doctor? Just be careful not to burn or break it." Lily gave him a naughty grin.

"Oh, don't worry. My equipment is made of the best material, and it comes with a lifetime guarantee."

"I'll remind you of that in thirty years," Lily murmured, "But for now, I'll be content with a demonstration of your thermometer's use."

Luke withdrew his hand from her wet center and grabbed her hips, pulling her further towards the edge of his desk. "Oh, you'll get that. A very thorough demonstration. Better hold on." He entered Lily in a single, slow stroke.

John Matheson walked into Medbay, answering Nurse Jensen's smile and greeting as she carried a smiling Naima towards him. "I guess you're looking for your family, Commander."

"I am indeed," John answered, taking Naima in his arms, who started gurgling with laughter when he lifted her up high above his head.

"Abosheel!" she exclaimed around the fingers she had in her mouth.

"I bet your mother is still with Dad, right?"

"Uh huh," Naima replied after taking her fingers out of her mouth.

John nodded his thanks to Nurse Jensen as he held the girl against his chest. "Thanks for looking after her."

The nurse smiled and ruffled Naima's red curls. "It was a pleasure. I had to fight the others off, actually--she's a real sweetheart."

"Like her mother." John smiled proudly at his daughter.

"Naima didn't just inherit her mother's good looks, but also her charm. Well, my shift is over. Have a good night."

"You too."

"Night!" Naima waved after nurse Jensen, who waved back.

John brushed an errant lock from Naima's face. "So let's go see where Ma and Dad are, OK?"

"kay."

As he walked up to Luke's office, John noticed the darkened windows, and after a short moment of concentration, a grin flashed across his face. [/Better get yourselves presentable, 'cause I'm coming in with a very impressionable minor in my arms./] Only a few seconds after he'd stopped in front of the door, it opened.

Stepping into Luke's office quickly, John found his partners standing behind Luke's desk, smiling. John immediately noticed Luke's open shirt and the state of Lily's hair, among other things. Naima, fortunately oblivious to such details, wriggled in his arms so he set her on the floor, and she ran up to her 'Da', who she hadn't seen all day, as fast as her short legs would carry her. That was pretty fast by now, since she always tried to keep up with the twins who were almost two years older than her.

"Hey, little princess! Did you have fun with the nurses and doctors out there?" Luke swept her up and Naima nodded vigorously, a big smile on her face.

"Ready to go home now?" Lily asked. Again the girl nodded.

"Good. Now just sit down a moment, OK?" Luke sat her on his chair and spun it around, which caused Naima to scream with joy.

"I'm glad I chatted with Nurse Jensen a bit before coming in here. I'd have hated to disturb you at a most unwelcome moment," John said with a grin, watching from where he was still standing just inside the door as Luke helped Lily fix the last hooks in the back of her dress.

"Now what could possibly give you reason to say that?" Luke asked, looking at John with an amused glitter in his eyes.

"I don't know. Maybe it was the darkened windows? The very familiar..." He licked his lips, searching for the right word, "...atmosphere in here? Or the fact that your shirt is still open, Lily's dress half undone and her hair tangled?"

Lily giggled and ran over to flow into John's arms, kissing him, then leaning back to look up at him adoringly. "Luke's brain needed a break."

"Still the same problem?"

Luke nodded, sighing.

"Well, I don't know if what you did was the ideal break from thinking about condoms, but knowing you two, you just couldn't resist Luke's aggressive advances, right?" John grinned at Lily.

The chair had slowed down, and Naima demanded, "More, Da, more!"

Luke spun it around again, giving John a teasing smile. "Well, I may not be much of a dancer, but I know how to do a horizontal mambo." While he finished buttoning his shirt, he cocked his head to the side and said, "You never did tell us how and when you learned to dance the Tango, you know."

John blinked his eyes at the unexpected comment, then gazed at his partner silently with an unreadable expression, the grin gone from his lips.

Luke frowned, giving him a worried look. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up unpleasant memories." He picked up Naima from his chair and threw her over his shoulder, making her laugh again.

John shook his head, saying softly, "No, they're not unpleasant. Not at all. Well, most of them at least." He smiled sadly.

"We understand if you don't want to talk about it," Lily said, reaching up to cup John's face in her hand, smiling gently, but he shook his head again.

"The memories keep coming back anyway. They have ever since I walked in on you listening to that song and we started practicing. I... I think you have a right to know. I've wanted to tell you for a while, but it's just..." He sighed softly. "It's a long story."

As Luke walked up to them with Naima on his shoulder, Lily said, "Well, then why don't we go back to our rooms, and you can tell us there?" She linked one arm with his and her other with Luke, looking from one to the other with a warm smile. "And tomorrow we'll all get up early to find a solution to the Drazi condom problem."

Several hours later, John, Luke and Lily lay snuggled up in bed, Lily on her back with her head on Luke's chest and her legs hooked over John's hip as he lay on his side, head supported by his hand. After they'd tucked Naima in--which had taken slightly longer than usual since she took advantage of having the undivided attention of all three parents--they had taken their time to relax from the daily routine, creating a special atmosphere in their bedroom with candles, scents and soft music.

As they lay there, Lily could suddenly feel that John had become absent-minded, pensive. She lifted her head from Luke's chest to look at their telepathic partner, seeing him stare holes in the air, and gently drew her left heel up his spine, which had the desired effect of rousing him.

"Hmm?" He asked, looking at her questioningly.

*"You don't *have* to tell us, Sweet Face, you know that." Lily could see in his eyes that she had guessed correctly about what occupied his mind.*

John looked at her and Luke silently before saying, "I know, but I want to. It's just I've never talked about it before, and..." His voice failed, and he swallowed. "That makes it difficult to put everything into words."

"Take your time, John. There's no hurry," Luke gently said.

John shook his head. "No. It would just carry on, going round in circles in my head. I have to get it out of my system." He looked at them again. "Well, as I said, it's a long story..." John hesitated, and Luke reached out to give his hand an encouraging squeeze.

*"You don't have to tell us *everything* tonight."*

Lily nodded. "Make a start, and then go with the flow."

John looked at them, seeing and feeling their love and support, and smiled his gratefulness. He lowered his eyes for a moment, trying to find a place to start, then took a deep breath and sat up, crossing his legs,

eyes intense as he looked at Luke and Lily again. "I was seventeen when I danced the tango for the first time..."

John Matheson sneaked into the room as quietly as possible, staying near the door. Of course, somebody soon discovered him, so he did his best to ignore the surprised looks from the assorted other students of the Minor Academy at Teeptown, Geneva. It wasn't usual for him to participate in any group activity, with the exception of the Tae Kwon Do classes, which he'd started taking as a way of keeping in touch with his heritage. He also enjoyed the physical exercise, and he was in the top three of the class. As he was in most classes.

He'd always been a good student, spending most of his free time reading whatever he could get his hands on, and he had a lot of time to focus on his studies. There was an elite at Teeptown, who had showed their abilities almost from birth, and had been raised by the Corps. John's telepathic ability--his 'Psi'--had only come out when he was eleven. People like him were called 'latents', since they didn't belong to the 'privileged' few whose Psi had shown early. 'Latents' made up most of the occupants of Teeptown, but despite being among others who'd been torn from their families and friends by the Corps, he'd never found a friend among them. Even when he'd still been a 'normal' child, he'd always been shy, quiet, and reserved, and he'd been too frightened and hurt by the separation from his parents to even talk to anyone for weeks after.

*One thing he'd learned quickly was not to cry, as he was ridiculed and punished when he did. "The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father", they had hammered that into his mind until he was barely able to remember the faces of his *real* mother and father. Some parents visited their children from time to time, but his never did. The thought that they might not *want* to see him again, that they were ashamed to have a telepathic son, was worse than the thought that they didn't know where he was, or weren't allowed to visit him for some reason, so he'd never dared to try and find them. He was only a P6, and while he didn't have any particular friends, he generally got along well with everybody and made valuable contributions to group projects in classes, so no one saw a reason to try and integrate him more into the community. To himself, John described the situation as a typical case of 'live and let live'.*

When he'd been looking at the poster advertising a tango course a few days earlier, he'd suddenly heard a female voice say, "Do you dance?"

He'd turned to find a stranger stand there. The woman was almost John's size, and her olive skin, along with the thick black hair which hung down her back in a braid, gave the impression of a Latino, while her high, prominent cheekbones hinted at Indio blood. Her eyes were of a surprisingly light but not quite definable color: almost green, but with speckles of other colors.

"Um, no." John finally managed to utter.

"Are you interested, Mr. ...?" She'd walked up to him and indicated the poster with her hand.

"Matheson," he'd automatically answered, trying to figure out what was happening here. "Well, it does sound interesting."

"Great. I'm lacking male participants, so I'm very happy to have found an interested individual." The corners of her mouth had turned up in a slight grin as she'd looked at him. "I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow for the first lesson."

Before John had been able to digest what the stranger had said, she'd turned and walked away.

"No excuses, Mr. Matheson," she'd called over her shoulder, her thick black braid swinging from side to side with every graceful step.

So he had come.

Suddenly, the murmuring in the room changed and quieted to a whisper as their instructor walked in. She wore a black leotard with a simple, knee-length skirt, and her hair was tied into a chignon. "Welcome. My name, as you might have guessed already, is Marcela Flores."

Ms. Flores gave them a short introduction to the history of tango before starting the practical training. One of the things she stressed most was the importance of one person leading and the other following, and what rules each of them had to follow. And posture too, of course. She interspersed her teachings with little insights into her experience as a tango dancer, some serious, some funny, and time went by quickly. When it was finished, John was surprised to find how much he'd enjoyed the lesson, and that he was actually looking forward to the next one.

A few weeks later, Ms. Flores called him back at the end of the lesson. She'd divided the class into two groups, so the more proficient dancers could help the ones who were still struggling. John was in the former group. As the rest of the class poured out the door, Ms. Flores spoke. "You are very talented, John, and while that's also true for others in this class, you're the only one who puts his heart into it. I think with additional training, you could become a fantastic tango dancer." John blushed at her compliment, but before he could say anything, she continued, "It would be a shame to waste this talent. Would you be interested in private lessons?"

John almost couldn't believe what he'd heard. "Well... Yes, Ma'am. Of course!"

She gave him a bright smile. "Wonderful."

From then on, he stayed longer after the regular classes, and in addition, met with Ms. Flores at her house on Sunday afternoons. They danced, working on steps and posture, and afterwards Ms. Flores would serve tea and cookies, and they talked. She must have been someone high-ranking, since her house was in the quarter where the people who ran Teetown lived. The rooms were spacious. Spartan, yet comfortable. One was bare of all furniture except a chair and a mirror, which was mostly hung with a cloth, so as not to distract them, Ms. Flores explained. This was the room she used for dancing.

John never asked her about her job before or besides teaching tango here, and Ms. Flores never asked about his life before the Corps, as if there was an unspoken agreement between them. Instead, they talked about books, movies, history, art, science, philosophy, anything that came to their minds. At first, John was reluctant to say much, afraid this might be some kind of test, but gradually he felt her genuine interest in his thoughts, and step by step, he relaxed and opened up. They made each other smile, and then laugh, something they both rarely did in public, and neither had anyone to do it with in private. A quick wit, intelligence, a healthy sense of humor--sometimes decidedly on the dry and dark side--and compassion were Ms. Flores' most outstanding characteristics. And her passion for the tango.

"Argentine Tango, the original, of course, not American Tango. They are two very different dances," she

had insisted during the first lesson in class.

When Ms. Flores told John stories about Milongas she had danced at, the musicians and dancers she had met, or the history of the Argentine Tango, her face grew animated, her hands drawing the events into the air as she spoke about them, and her speckled eyes turned to a clearer green, sparkling with life. John loved to listen to her tales, enriched by the Spanish accent she suddenly slipped into, while usually her English pronunciation was flawless.

John had finally found someone, who despite their differences accepted him as he was. Someone he could trust--a friend. And a passion for tango. Argentine Tango, of course.

It was Thursday, August 3, 2254.

Ms. Flores had asked him to come over Thursday evening instead of Sunday afternoon this week. When she opened the door for John, he was startled to find that he could suddenly look her straight in the eyes. Looking down, he saw her feet were enclosed in black velvet high-heeled shoes, and instead of the usual simple dress or pants and shirt from their training sessions, she wore a knee-length red velvet dress with a wrap-around skirt, crossing in front of her right leg so it would open when she moved. She'd put her hair into a chignon again, and caught it in a glittering black net at the back of her neck. Instead of the black leather gloves all telepaths wore, she had put on a thinner, more elegant version, which reached her elbows, reminding John of 20th century movies.

She threw something at him, and he looked uncomprehending at the pass he held in his hands--a pass that allowed him to leave Teeptown for the whole night, something very rare. John looked up at her quizzically, only to have a bundle of clothes thrown at him next.

"You can go change in there." Ms. Flores indicated the dance room with her head.

"But where are we going?"

A smile played around her lips. "We're going dancing."

It apparently wasn't the first time Ms. Flores had visited "El Ultimo Tango" in Geneva, as the patrons and staff greeted her warmly. "Ah, Marcela!"--"Bon soir, Marcela!"--"Mais quel joie!" Some even hugged her, which was most unusual behavior by 'normals' toward a telepath. Briefly, John wondered whether these people even knew that she was...but he shook the thought off. He was sure even if they didn't, Ms. Flores would never abuse her abilities.

She introduced John to the salon's owner as her student. After exchanging a few amicable words with her in Spanish, he led them to a niche with a small table, then excused himself after lightly kissing Ms. Flores' hand.

John looked around the salon as he sat. They had a view of the complete dance floor from this niche, and he let his eyes roam over the multitude of dancers. He could see couples of almost every age, from ones barely moving to others expertly adorning their steps, some in the typical 'milonguero' close embrace style, others in the open dance position which was taught in dance schools.

Suddenly, the salon's owner appeared again and put a champagne bucket, containing a bottle of the sparkling wine, and two elegant glasses on the table. He filled each glass half full before retreating with a slight bow.

Ms. Flores lifted her glass of champagne. "To the tango, and the most talented student I've had in many years."

John blushed slightly at the compliment as he lifted his glass. "And to a wonderful teacher."

She inclined her head in thanks. "Oh, if you don't mind, I'd prefer that we call each other by our first names when we're in private. I'm tired of hearing 'Ms. Flores' and saying, 'Mr. Matheson' all the time. 'Marcela' and 'John' are so much simpler." She gave him a warm smile.

"I'm honored." John nodded. They clinked their glasses, and he experimentally sipped on the sparkling alcoholic drink. John had never tried champagne--never drank anything alcoholic so far--but discovered it didn't taste too bad.

"Do you like it?" Ms. Flo... Marcela asked with an amused grin.

"I haven't decided yet," he answered, which made her laugh.

"Well, you have the whole night to make your decision." She looked out at the dance floor, taking in the dancers and the music, obviously enjoying being there.

John stood, offering her his hand. "Care to dance, Señorita?"

He led her back to their table more than an hour later. They had been dancing without a break, and Marcela had taught him the 'milonguero' style and how to change from it to the open position, and vice versa. John couldn't remember a time when he'd enjoyed himself more in all his years in the Corps.

John noticed Marcela's glass was almost empty and poured her some more champagne, and for a while, they sat in comfortable silence, watching the other dancers and sipping their wine.

After a while, John became aware of something, and he let his eyes roam the room to locate the source. When he did, he leaned slightly closer to Marcela and murmured, "Is it my imagination, or is that girl staring at us?" He inclined his head to give Marcela a rough direction.

She followed the hint with her eyes, making it seem as if she was just looking around, then nodded. "Got her."

The girl he'd indicated seemed to be around John's age, and her blonde shoulder-length hair fell around her face in soft waves. Two other females were sitting at her table, their backs to Marcela and him, but the blonde faced them and had been throwing furtive glances in their direction for a while.

Still looking in the general direction of the girl, Marcela said with a smile, "She's not staring at us, she's staring at you."

John stared at Marcela wide-eyed.

"Oh, don't tell me you didn't notice." Elbows resting on the table, chin leaning on her entwined fingers, she gave him an amused smile.

John blushed. The thought that any female could be interested in him was completely alien to him, and even if he'd shown any interest in one of the girls at Teeptown, they probably would have laughed him in the face. He'd never really belonged, and he doubted he ever would. John gave Marcela a guarded look. Would she ridicule him for his lack of experience in yet another part of life?

Marcela laughed lightly. "She isn't the only woman in here who has noticed you. You're a handsome young man and a graceful dancer, John, only a little too reserved and well-behaved for your own good, sometimes." She smiled gently. "This song has only just started. Why don't you go ask her to dance? Watching others dance can be very inspiring, but dancing with others is even more so."

John looked at her for a while, realizing that she was right, then took a deep breath in an effort to get rid of the butterflies that had suddenly taken over his stomach. Giving Marcela a short nod, he got up and walked over to the table where the young blonde woman sat. Suppressing his nervousness, he bowed slightly and asked, "May I have this dance?" He was proud that his voice didn't shake, and he even managed to give her a slight smile.

The blonde smiled back. "I'd love to." She excused herself from her companions and put her hand into his as she got up, then stepped onto the dance floor with John.

John returned to the table he shared with Marcela a few songs later. "Well?" she asked. While he'd been dancing with the blonde, John had noticed that she had agreed to one dance with the salon's owner, but otherwise remained seated.

"It's... interesting. Very different to dancing with you. She doesn't come anywhere near your level of skill of course, but it was fascinating to find where her limits are, and what we could do within them. In class, I know exactly which of the others can do what, but this is something totally new."

"And you did very well at adapting to her level. Some dancers never learn how to do that, they just want to show off. But you, John--you just want to dance." [/You need to dance. Just like me./] Marcela gave him a warm smile.

John smiled back, knowing as he looked into her now almost completely green eyes that she understood him like no one had before. [/Yes, exactly./]

Teeptown was quiet when they got home sometime after midnight. Marcela only broke the silence when they were inside her house and she had turned on the light, dimming it slightly. "I'd really like to have a cup of tea now. Care to join me? Although you look tired." Her mouth was curved upwards in the slightest grin.

John smiled. "I am, but tea sounds very nice, thank you. I probably couldn't sleep just yet, anyway."

While Marcela brewed the tea, John got out the china, milk, and sugar and put it all onto a tray. It was almost like a ritual, which had developed in their teatimes after John's private tango lessons on Sunday afternoons. They rarely spoke before they'd settled down on the couch and had their first sip of tea, and

that night was no exception.

Marcela let out a deep, contented sigh as she held the teacup in her hands. "Wonderful."

John smiled. "It is. The whole evening--night--was wonderful. Thank you." He looked at his teacher sincerely. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since..." Suddenly, he found himself unable to go on, as for just a moment the memories of being taken from his parents bubbled up in his mind.

"I enjoyed it, too. Very much so." Marcela gave him an understanding smile, undoubtedly aware of his momentary emotional turmoil, but not wanting to distress him by picking up on it. Suddenly, her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, I forgot something." She put the cup onto the table and jumped up gracefully, then disappeared into the kitchen.

John looked after her quizzically. Something told him that she hadn't really forgotten anything, but he was too tired to try and figure it out, so instead concentrated on the tea's rich flavor, as he took another sip of the steaming brew.

A short while later, Marcela came back, carrying a small cake with a burning candle in the middle on a plate.

John stared at the cake as she put the plate down on the table. [No, this can't be. There must be another reason... she can't possibly...]

"Happy birthday," he heard her say.

John blinked, but was unable to tear his eyes off the cake, though he didn't really see it. What he saw, with frightening clarity, was a bigger cake, with eleven candles on it, standing on a bigger table, around which sat a small group of children, and beside him his parents, all clapping their hands and cheering as he blew out all candles at once.

[//John!//]

The sharp thought snapped him back to the present. Marcela was looking at him with the same concern he'd heard/felt in her mind-voice. She must have been calling his name repeatedly before 'pathing to him, but John was still unable to answer her, as she asked if he was all right. He found himself shaking with the effort to keep his emotions under control, hands clenched into fists so tight that the muscles in his arms hurt from the strain. He could feel tears threatening and fought them back angrily. [No, I will not cry. I will NOT!] Abruptly Matheson stood, turning away from Marcela's compassionate eyes, blindly staring out of the window, as he tried to calm down and re-center, using one of the techniques he'd learned from his teachers in his early days at Teptown.

He heard Marcela get up, but she didn't come nearer. [//John, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize...//] Her mind-voice didn't disguise the fact that she was mortified to have caused him pain, and John knew she focused her thoughts tightly, so as to not intrude on his privacy by picking something up accidentally. [//This was a stupid idea!//]

[//No!//] John took several deep breaths, then turned to face her, whispering, "No one... ever did anything like... this... for me since... I was brought here. No one ever... cared enough."

Marcela closed her eyes, pain showing in her features, and John felt her mind softly touch the edge of his,

offering him a glimpse into her soul. He felt a mixture of emotions similar to his own--the feeling of a great loss, pain, anger, loneliness, but also gratitude for his friendship.

John gave her a sad smile when she looked at him again, letting her know how much he enjoyed his tango lessons with her and their tea-time on Sunday afternoons, how much her friendship meant to him.

They just stood there, looking at each other, then Marcela deliberately broke the emotional moment by sitting down again, gesturing at the cake. "I hope you like chocolate cake. I believe the usual tradition calls for you to blow out the candle and wish for something," she said lightly, steering them away from the emotionally unsettling topic of their life before the Corps and its consequences.

John took a deep breath and nodded, then joined her on the couch again, looking at the single burning candle as he tried to think of something to wish for. In the Corps, personal birthdays weren't regarded as important. For the children, Birthday was when new children arrived, but from Minor academy on, birthdays were practically non-existent, only another bit of data in one's bio file.

*John didn't dare to wish for his deepest dream to come true, but there was another one, a dream he'd had since he could remember, and for which he'd been laughed at and ridiculed after the other children in Teetown had found out. So he had hidden it deep down inside, in that secret place no one, not the strongest telepaths who'd scanned him, had found until now. It was foolish to cling to it, he knew, but he also knew that if he gave it up, *they* had really won. [And maybe, one day, by some miracle...]*

He focused and sent his wish out with his breath.

John emerged from Marcela's dance room after changing back into his normal clothes again. Reluctantly. He suppressed a sigh. [I guess this is just what going back home after a vacation must feel like.] He wished he could claim that the Corps was home.

Marcela joined him from the kitchen, and silently accompanied him to the door.

"I guess it's back to real life again." John tried to smile, but knew he faltered, and quickly lowered his eyes.

"John..."

"It's OK. That's the way it is. Thank you, again." He looked up at her, a sad smile on his lips. "And good night. See you at the next lesson."

He started turning to open the door, but suddenly caught a flicker of something, which Marcela immediately suppressed as she turned her back on him. Still he recognized part of it. John didn't know what had triggered it, though it seemed almost that it had been a reaction to what he'd said. [/No! You'll never lose my friendship!]

For a moment, he could feel the full weight of Marcela's loneliness crash in on him, painfully familiar, but also her anger at herself for letting him see her doubts and fears. Suddenly, he saw her shoulders shake, and realized she was crying. Softly touching her shoulders, he turned her around, looking into her tear-filled eyes so she could see and feel that he was sincere as he 'pathed, [/I showed you how much your friendship means to me, and nothing will change that. How could you still doubt it? You gave me so much. I swear to you that you'll never be alone, not as long as I live!]

He could feel there was more to it, much more, but Marcela had shut down on her feelings. Only her eyes still showed that she was afraid of something.

[/Hold me. Please, just hold me for a little while,/] she pleaded, burying her head in his neck and clinging to him like a frightened child.

John was surprised both by what she had said and done, and by how protective he felt of this woman who probably was twice his age. So he held her, whispering and pathing reassurances at first, then just holding her silently. The feeling of her warm body so close to his was strange, but it also had something soothing, reminding him of how his mother had used to hold and comfort him.

Gradually, he became aware that the warmth of Marcela's body in his arms, and the pressure of her breasts against his ribcage, had quite a different effect on him, too.

John pulled back abruptly, feeling his cheeks burning. He could see from the way she looked at him that she knew. [Of course she knows! With her standing so close, she couldn't help but notice!] In a shaky voice, he whispered, "I'm sorry Marcela... Ms. Flores. I didn't... I'd never..." John felt ashamed, mortified about his loss of control. How could he let this happen? He lowered his eyes, too upset and confused to block, but so it seemed was Marcela. He could feel her emotional turmoil, but also realized that her arms still held him loosely, as if she was too shocked to move. "I'd better leave." John reached for her arms to gently pry himself out of her embrace.

He didn't know how it happened or who had initiated it, but suddenly their lips touched, the softest brush, just for a moment, and Marcela's surprise was as clear as his own. For the blink of an eye they stood there, staring into each other's eyes, their faces maybe an inch apart, but then their mouths were drawn together again, like magnets. Marcela seemed to melt against him, almost as if they were dancing, her left hand cradling the back of his neck, her right on his shoulder, and he realized he was holding her tightly again. He suddenly felt wide-awake, his tiredness gone, and his whole body seemed to be tingling.

[Stop it! She's your teacher!] a voice inside his head screamed. The pressure of her body against his felt so right. [But it's wrong!] The voice insisted, [You know that you have to stop this, you've gone too far already!] But the voice was drowned by a wave of new sensations when Marcela's soft lips opened under his, her tongue gently pushing into John's mouth, probing it and drawing his tongue out. Somehow, it felt exactly like he'd always imagined it, and yet totally different. It was incredibly intense, as he felt her in so many more ways than 'normals' ever could.

Somehow, they ended up in Marcela's bedroom, and from then on everything was a jumble in John's memories, but there also were flashes of clarity. He remembered moments of shyness and insecurity; he remembered Marcela's gentle guidance, verbal, physical and mental; he remembered feeling a momentary doubt from Marcela, which was soon forgotten among caresses and kisses. The way Marcela threw back her head as he entered her; the feeling of her fingernails raking over his back and shoulders; the look in her half-lidded eyes as he thrust into her again and again; the feeling of her skin against his, both covered in a fine sheath of sweat. He remembered emotions and sensations of such intensity that he thought he couldn't stand them. He remembered ecstasy, bliss, and the sweetness of the afterglow.

When John looked into Marcela's eyes, lifting his head from her shoulder, he could see a faint regret in them--not of what they'd done, but of what they both knew they couldn't have. The Corps only sanctioned marriages of couples genetically matched to create 'productive' offspring. A mediocre telepath like John would never be matched with a high-level one like Marcela, and even if they didn't intend to marry and have a family, their relationship would be considered off-limits. Looking into her eyes, John again felt

instinctively that there was more, much more behind Marcela's regret, but he didn't push. He knew certain things were better left unsaid, or even unthought. Suddenly, a strange mixture of emotions bubbled up inside him--gratitude, protectiveness, regret for what they'd never have and something he wasn't ready to call 'love' yet.

Marcela reached up her right hand, gently stroking his cheek. [You know we cannot repeat this.]

John nodded silently.

[We have to do our best to hide this from them. If we fail...] Her gaze wavered for a moment, before she continued, [The consequences will be dire for both of us.] She pressed her lips together, looking up at the ceiling, and John could feel her blocks come up like a wall between them. "I shouldn't have allowed this to happen!"

"I will not have you blaming yourself for something we both allowed to happen! It's just as much my fault!" John inserted fiercely.

Marcela looked at him again with a sad smile, then whispered, "But you don't know everything that I know, John. I should have known better."

John lowered his head, covering her mouth with his in a slow, gentle kiss, then looked at her and whispered, "I don't regret anything that happened tonight. I never will. And I hope..." his voice quivered as suddenly insecurity hit him again, but he continued nonetheless, his eyes never leaving hers, "I hope that you don't either."

Marcela pulled him into her embrace, her warm breath tickling in his ear, as she replied, "No, never."

John managed to sneak into bed without being seen or waking his roommate, so no one knew how much time had passed between his coming back to Teetown and returning to his room.

The next time he and Marcela saw each other was at the regular lesson in the following week. Nothing in Marcela's behavior indicated that anything had happened. So much so, that John almost asked himself if he'd imagined it all. [No, I can't have.] For him, everything still seemed the same, and yet completely different. He usually enjoyed helping Marcela with the small group of the most talented students in her tango class, which a few weeks ago had been added to the advanced lessons he'd been receiving for a while already. This time he had to be careful to stay concentrated, as his mind was constantly on the verge of drifting off. John was almost glad when Marcela dismissed them.

Just before walking out the door behind the other students, he looked back on an impulse, and Marcela smiled at him in a way that erased any doubt he'd had about his memories of the night leading up to his birthday. It was the tiniest smile, only for him, and John answered it in kind, doing his best to keep his relief about her acknowledgment of what had happened between them from leaking out.

When they talked over tea after John's next private lesson at Marcela's house, they both agreed that what had happened on his birthday would have to remain a one-night stand, as the risks were too high if it ever happened again. But only one week later, they found they were unable to resist the temptation that was always present whenever they were alone in a room. What begun with a stolen kiss progressed into

much more, and they ended up making love on Marcela's couch.

"John, we cannot continue like this," Marcela whispered, looking down into his eyes from where she lay on top of him.

John reached up to smooth her tangled hair back. "The only way to stop this from happening would be to stop seeing each other, you know that. But if we stopped meeting, someone would notice, and they'd wonder." He looked into her chameleon eyes, tracing his fingers over her brow, down the side of her face, along her high cheekbones. "I can't help wanting you."

"Nor I you," Marcela admitted softly. "We have both been lonely for too long." She rested her head on John's chest, and he stroked her hair gently. He knew she was right, that what they did was dangerous, and the danger grew every time they gave in to their bodies' needs, but still he refused to regret what had happened between them. He'd never felt as whole as when he was with Marcela.

Marcela seemed to have the same thought. "We have to be very, very careful, John. As soon as there's the slightest indication that anyone has noticed anything..."

"We'll have to stop seeing each other. I agree." John sighed as the hopelessness of their situation fully hit him, and bitterness rose inside him. "Why can't the world just let us be what we want?"

Marcela lifted her head to look at him again. "It's not the world, John, it's the people who make it what it is. If we try to create our own small world, our sanctuary, we have to do it in absolute secrecy. Because if they find out, they'll try to destroy it, and break us to their will." Marcela's voice didn't brook any argument. She knew exactly what she was talking about.

They were being careful, trying not to behave differently than before his birthday around John's classmates in the tango lessons, and they seemed to succeed, even though John had to be careful not to react to looks, remarks or jokes. When one day after a lesson some of the other tango students joked about what John and Marcela could possibly be doing during his private lessons on Sundays, John blushed deeply, but instead of answering lowered his eyes, allowing them to misinterpret his reaction as typical of someone who was shy and totally inexperienced with women.

They kept strictly to their usual schedule, not allowing themselves to meet more often, despite barely being able to wait for Sunday afternoon. Of course, this meant that they didn't always have time left to actually dance—at least not tango, although they sometimes did stay vertical even then.

*After one of the Sunday lessons during which they *had* danced tango, John was studying Marcela's face as she sipped tea, her thoughts far away. Suddenly, she seemed to notice his scrutiny and her eyes focused on him, studying him with an unreadable expression. She set the cup down onto the saucer and looked him straight in the eyes.*

"John, don't fall in love with me, please don't. You know that we cannot be together, and I don't know how much longer I'll be here. My job, my real job, may require me to leave from one day to the next, and I don't want you to be hurt." The color of her eyes seemed to shift ceaselessly as she spoke, as if they were reflecting her emotional turmoil. Marcela reached out and caressed John's cheek softly with the back of her hand. "If that should ever happen, remember that you'll always have a special place in my heart. My friendship will always be with you, just as I know yours will always be with me."

John was unable to say anything as he stared at her wide-eyed, trying to figure out what had caused this sudden revelation.

Marcela laughed self-consciously. "I'm sorry. I seem to be a bit emotional today. Don't worry John, everything is OK, but I've wanted to tell you this for a long while. I just never found the right moment." She kissed him softly, then sat back. "I'd better let you go, or your roommate will wonder what took you so long today and start asking questions." She smiled, obviously to take the sting from her words, and while John agreed with what she'd said, her words still hurt.

[Don't be stupid. You know how she meant it.] John made an effort to smile back. "You're right. And don't worry about me. I'll get by, as always." He quickly finished his tea and left.

John had been worried by Marcela's uncharacteristic outburst, but the following weeks went by without a sign of anything unusual, so he started relaxing again, attributing his worries and doubts to the slight paranoia he'd developed due to their secret affair.

Then one Sunday, she wasn't there.

John had knocked on the door of Marcela's house as usual, but that day she didn't open it. He called for her, and when she didn't answer he tried to open the door. It was locked.

And he knew.

John stood there, unable to think, as his mind repeated one word, over and over. [No!]

He didn't go back to his room at once. He couldn't face anyone right then. Instead, John visited his favorite place in Teeptown, a big tree he'd used to climb as a child, when he'd wanted to be alone. He hadn't been there in a long while. [Not since meeting Marcela...] John leaned his head back against the trunk, as he sat on a branch high up in the tree, finally letting go of his emotions. He was overwhelmed with shock, pain, grief, and anger. [No goodbye? Not a single word, a gesture? Anything? You knew this would happen, didn't you? That's why you told me not to fall in love with you! Didn't you realize I already had, in the moment you volunteered me for your tango class?]

John tried to hold on to the anger, but it slipped from his grasp all too soon, revealing a hole inside him where Marcela's presence used to be, dark and bottomless, and hurting... hurting. An inhuman sound escaped John's throat, as the hurt and pain cut deeper and deeper inside him, to the very core of his being, until he had to bite his lip to prevent himself from screaming.

When John finally went back to his room, his face was a mask and his blocks closed his emotions off as much from himself as from others. He slumped onto the bed--fortunately finding his roommate was still out with friends--part of him marveling how familiar his state of numbness and detachment felt.

Then he recognized the feeling. It was just like after he'd been stolen from his parents.

"Did you ever see her again, or find out why she left without any goodbye?"

John slowly focused on Lily's face, gradually realizing that she had asked that question in a soft voice, and that tears were rolling down her cheeks. When he touched his own face, his fingertips got wet. He stared at them, not remembering that he had cried. He couldn't remember anything since he'd begun telling the story of his tango lessons. "I never thought... After all this time..."

He felt someone touch his shoulder, and looked into Luke's warm brown eyes. They were red-rimmed too.

John took a deep breath, pulling himself back into the present, and finally answered Lily's question. "No. I never heard from her. We were informed that there wouldn't be any more tango classes, no reasons given. Some of our class asked me to continue with them, but I refused, saying I was far from teacher level and I didn't want to shame Ms. Flores. I never danced tango again. Not until..." His eyes focused on Lily's, and he reached out to stroke her cheek.

Lily leaned her head into his hand and closed her eyes, smiling as tears emerged between her lids.

"Did you ever..."

"Try to find her?" John completed Luke's question, and sighed. "Even back then I was able to hack into files I didn't have clearance for, but I was afraid that if I did try and find out what had happened to Marcela, I might endanger her. I..." He frowned, trying to find the right words, "I somehow had a feeling that there was something wrong. That Marcela didn't leave because of her job. There wasn't anything I could base this feeling on, only my instinct, and things she had said and not said in our conversations, but it was very strong, so I never dared to search for her. I might have tried after the telepath war, but a lot of files were lost and there were still many of the same people in charge, who could have been a danger to her." John smiled sadly. "She probably died during the war. Or... or maybe she found a place far, far away from everything, where she could live in peace." What he didn't say was, [Otherwise Marcela would have contacted me by now. She would have, I'm sure of it!]

"She must have been very special." Luke gently squeezed his hand.

"That she was." John smiled weakly, squeezing back, then took Lily's hand with his free one and looked at his partners intensely. "As are you two. I cannot thank all the Gods and Goddesses enough for leading me to you. A piece of my heart will always belong to Marcela, and while most others would feel jealous, you two understand, and accept." His voice was raw with emotion when he whispered, "Thank you."

He was pulled into their arms, feeling their love pour over him, and let himself be comforted and soothed as he shared some memories of Marcela with Luke and Lily. [//There will never be enough words for me to express how much I love you two!//]

[//Then don't talk,/] Lily sent back, pulling John down into a deep, passionate kiss.

[//Exactly,/] Luke added as he took over from Lily, [//There are much better uses for your mouth anyway.//]

John was breathing hard by the time Luke let go. [//So do you think I'll manage to express my love without words?//] He sighed softly as his lovers pushed him down onto the mattress to find out.

"Come on now, he's not going to space you." Luke looked over at John apprehensively, as his partner tried to inject a reassuring note into his voice.

Luke swallowed hard before responding, "The mood the Captain has been in recently, anything is possible. He is really pissed about the space those crates are taking up on the flight deck. Did you hear what he just said to me?" The doctor walked back into the bedroom from the living area, where he'd taken the Captain's call, and dropped himself heavily onto the edge of the bed.

John shook his head, his usually calm and impassive face reflecting his concern, as Luke went on, "He said that if I couldn't clear the space that the crates were occupying, he'd find another way of making extra space on the ship. What do you think he meant by that? And why has he called me this early? I was supposed to have until 08:00 to clear the crates. It's only 07:00, and he wants me down there now."

Luke got up from the bed and walked to the wardrobe, pulling out clothes more or less at random, as John and Lily lay in their bed, watching him. He turned, pulling on a pair of pants, and tried to smile at his partners. "I'm sure everything will be OK. I mean, what's the worst he can do? Fire me for incompetence?" Luke closed his eyes, wishing he hadn't said that. If he wanted, that was exactly what Gideon could do. The error on the requisition was Luke's responsibility. It didn't matter that one of his team had completed the form incorrectly. Luke had signed it, authorizing the delivery. The buck stopped on Luke's desk, and this buck could turn out to be very expensive.

He sighed deeply as he pulled on his shirt, trying to think of something to say to fill the silence in the room. Lily and John just watched him, not knowing what to say or do. They all knew that Gideon had been bad tempered for weeks, and they understood the cause. Demon was not recovering from her depression. In fact, she seemed to be gradually going further and further away from all her friends and family. They could only assume that her relations with her husband were no better. They all knew that at the time of Demon and Matthew's third wedding anniversary a couple of weeks before, there had been a very tense atmosphere at the family dinner held to celebrate the event.

Gideon had never suffered fools gladly, and in the last few weeks he hadn't suffered them at all. Luke had a very unpleasant feeling that he had just promoted himself to the very top of Gideon's idiot list.

The doctor sighed as he finished dressing and walked to kiss his partners goodbye. Lily looked up at him sadly and asked, "Don't you want something to eat before you go?"

Luke shook his head and tried a little gallows humor, "No thanks. Maybe if I don't eat a hearty breakfast, I won't end up as the condemned man." The joke fell flat as John and Lily continued to look anxious. Luke tried again. "If I don't come back, kiss the children for me and remind them that once upon a time they had two fathers, not just the one Aboji and a wicked uncle."

Lily tried to smile bravely but failed dismally. Luke sighed again and turned to leave the room, hearing John's whispered, "Good luck," as the doors closed behind him.

When Luke arrived at the doors to the landing bay, he found his path blocked by a very irritated looking Captain. Gideon snapped as soon as he saw the doctor, "What took you so long? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised though, these days you don't seem to be able to comply with any order promptly."

Luke swallowed a rejoinder about how John and Lily preferred him to take his time about certain things.

Given the likely state of Gideon's home and sex life, that wouldn't have been the most tactful remark. No point adding fuel to the fire. Luke straightened his back and braced himself for the worst as he said, "I'm sorry if I've held you up, Captain. What can I do for you?"

The apology didn't seem to help much. Gideon growled, "You know damned well what you can do for me. You can clear my flight deck of those crates full of prophylactics." Luke was momentarily impressed. Gideon didn't often use such technical and multi-syllabic terms. Maybe Demon had been giving him vocabulary lessons. The doctor dragged his attention back to the man standing in front of him. Gideon looked as if he had got out of the wrong side of bed that morning. Actually, he looked as if he had never got into bed the night before, or maybe even for several nights before that. If Demon was giving the Captain vocabulary lessons, that must be about all she was giving him.

Luke swallowed hard and tried to stop himself whining as he said, "You gave me until 08:00 to clear them out. I still have another..." he checked the clock on the wall behind Gideon, "forty-seven minutes to go."

Gideon grinned. Luke wished he wouldn't do that, as the last time he'd seen a grin like that it had been on a picture of a Great White Shark that had been about to bite the leg off an unsuspecting diver. Luke wondered which part of his anatomy Gideon intended to bite off. He only hoped it would be his head.

"Oh, and exactly how do you plan to use those forty-seven minutes, Doctor? Maybe you could invent a transporter system, just like Star Trek, and get Scotty to beam up all those crates. Or maybe you could put out a call for Superman to fly in and he'll carry them all away in one armful."

Luke considered telling the Captain that sarcasm was the lowest form of wit, but decided that he'd like to live at least until his forty-seven...forty-six minutes were up. He smiled in what he hoped was a charming way, although he knew that his chances of being able to wheedle his way out of this situation were slim to none. "You never know, Captain. Maybe the horse will sing."

Gideon's mouth twitched and Luke was almost sure he had nearly provoked a smile with his reference to the story from the Arabian Nights. Luke tried another winning smile, but the Captain's face had fallen back into his best poker playing, deadpan expression as he said, "You may be good, Doc, but I doubt if even you can pull that one off. So, are you ready to pay the price for your 'clerical error'?"

Luke nodded gloomily and followed the Captain through the doors into the landing bay, wondering if he'd still have a job forty-four minutes later.

The view that met his eyes as he entered the landing bay was not what Luke had expected. Instead of the piles of crates that had been haunting his dreams for weeks, a small ship blocked his view. He had no idea what type of ship it was, never having had any great interest in ship's design. [Although I bet John could identify it instantly.] It looked like some sort of small cargo carrier.

Luke turned to Gideon and looked at him quizzically, as a ramp started to lower from the belly of the ship. Two crewmen who had been loitering by the door straightened to attention as the Captain and Doctor entered the landing bay, saluting smartly. Luke heard Gideon's murmured, "At ease," then turned his attention to the figure emerging from the ship.

It was a Drazi, although Luke couldn't be sure if it was male or female. To tell the difference required a closer examination than the doctor was willing to make without prior introduction to the Drazi concerned, and preferably written orders or permission. [Who the hell is s/he?] Luke pondered to himself as the

Drazi approached. A glance at his Captain showed that Gideon was wearing his shark's grin again. Luke shuddered in anticipation of exactly what the Captain had in store for him. [He's probably sold me as a general slave, cabin boy and dishwasher combined. I only hope that he didn't promise I'd perform any other duties!] Memories of the size of the Drazi condoms made Luke wince visibly and clench his buttocks.

"Doctor, let me introduce you to Captain Grenjo. He's on his way to the Drazi colony of Devorni, and has stopped off to do a little trade with us. Have you heard about the crisis on Devorni, Doctor?" Gideon's tone was jovial, but his smile looked more like a snarl. Images of sharks biting legs off were quickly replaced in Luke's mind by visions of grizzly bears on the rampage. He decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and that opening his mouth would only lead to more trouble. Luke shook his head and kept his lips firmly sealed. At least that way, Gideon couldn't rip his tongue out.

Captain Grenjo slapped Gideon on the back, causing the Captain to cough slightly, and beamed at the doctor as he said. "Captain Gideon certainly keeps up with the news! He's offered us an ideal way to make a little profit, while performing a service to the community on Devorni. We'll be heroes when we arrive there. Rich heroes."

Luke was wondering what the hell this had to do with his condom problem. Then Gideon explained, slowly, in words of one syllable, so that even an idiot of a doctor could understand.

Devorni was suffering from a population explosion, or maybe that should be a copulation explosion. There was something in the atmosphere that raised the libido of the average Drazi to the point where they had turned sex into both an art form and a spectator sport. Unfortunately, the same element in the air had negated all chemical forms of birth control. If the local Drazi population wanted to prevent their population getting totally out of control, they faced two choices. Either they masturbated themselves into total exhaustion, or they used condoms. Lots of condoms. Even 100,000 condoms would barely meet the demand.

Gideon and Grenjo had done a deal whereby the Drazi took the Excalibur's entire supply of Drazi condoms in exchange for every piece of Breen the Drazi cargo ship carried. That was one hell of a lot of Breen, but even Luke knew that the Excalibur's catering department could never keep up with demand for the stuff. This was one of those wonderful deals where everyone would win.

Nearly everyone. The expression on Gideon's face told Luke that he was probably going to be the only person who lost out on this deal.

"I've been telling Captain Grenjo what a music lover you are." Gideon's grin had reached the point where pictures of killer whales forced themselves into Luke's mind.

[Music lover? Me?] Luke tried to keep his face expressionless, but was convinced that his panic must be clear to everyone.

Gideon continued, "It turns out that Captain Grenjo is a real aficionado of Narn opera, and he can't wait to share it with you. I told him that you'd be delighted to listen to as much of his collection as he can play for you, while these men are loading his ship."

Luke's heart hit his boots. Not only was the Captain using six syllable words--always a danger sign--but the two crewmen chosen to load the crates onto Grenjo's ship both looked small and weak. The way they were slouched indolently on top of the crates gave Luke the strong impression that they wouldn't be in any hurry to complete their task. Which was, no doubt, exactly what Gideon had intended.

Gideon's smile was pure evil as he turned to Grenjo and said, "I'm sorry I can't spare more people to help with the loading, but these two should be able to complete the job in three or four hours. Five at the outside."

Luke nearly fainted. The prospect of five hours of Narn opera was enough to make him wish that Gideon had thrown him out of an airlock. Naked. He gave the Captain his best wounded puppy dog look as he whimpered, "Why? What did I do?"

*The Captain leaned forward and whispered into Luke's ear. "Cast your mind back a while, Doctor. You might remember a little prank you participated in. Impersonating a President is a punishable offense you know. Your sentence is five hours of Narn opera. No appeal, no reduction for good behavior. From what I hear about Narn opera, you'd prefer it if the horse *did* sing."*

Luke's eyes opened wide, as he remembered the incident Gideon had referred to. "But that was two years ago!" he whined.

Gideon's grin was full of malicious pleasure. "Didn't you know that I'm part Klingon, Doctor? There's an old Klingon saying. 'Revenge is a dish best served cold.' You should catch up on your Star Trek. After you've refreshed your memory on Narn opera."

The Captain turned and left the landing bay, laughing softly to himself. Luke followed the Drazi Captain up the ramp of his ship, ready to serve his sentence, wishing that he could be struck deaf.

{Chapter 1}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four Q

{Part 1: The Last Tango in Geneva} {Part 2: End of the Trial}