

The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble - Part 1: Preparations

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Demmon in a completely sheer, black something.

Chapter 2

Max lay back in the bath, luxuriating in the feel of the hot water and the women who sat on either side of him. He had an arm around each of their shoulders and was enjoying the lazy contentment that came from several bouts of passionate lovemaking. Ilas' advanced pregnancy had made her less limber than usual, but anything she lacked in technique, she certainly made up for in enthusiasm. Dureena rested her head against his shoulder for a while, as they all sat in silence, then she turned around and smiled at Max.

"So this time we have to put up with you for a whole month, do we?"

Max smiled and nodded. "Well, that's if you want me. I can always go back with Gideon and Matheson if you don't."

The next thing he knew, his head was beneath the water and four hands were holding him down. Then a mouth clamped over his and breathed air into him, before he was dragged back to the surface, spluttering.

When Max stopped coughing, he looked at the two women who now knelt in front of him, grinning at him. "Do I take that to mean you'd rather I stayed?" They both nodded, still smiling. "Well, you have a damned funny way of showing your affection. Trying to drown me, indeed. Maybe I should go back after all, no one on the Excalibur has ever tried to drown me."

Dureena grinned and leaned forward to kiss him. "That's only because there isn't enough water on the ship for them to try. I'm sure if given half a chance, most of the crew of the Excalibur would happily volunteer to dunk you."

"Oh thanks. And I thought I'd win any contest they held for Mr. Congeniality." Max grinned back at her, knowing that his irascibility didn't always make him the most popular person on board, and his use of a keen brain and a sharp tongue didn't help. But here on Eriadne, he never felt the need to use that wit to put other people down. Here, he could relax, knowing that these two women loved him despite his flaws, his vulnerabilities, and his defenses. So here he relaxed, and he had every intention of staying relaxed for the next month.

He turned to Ilas and slowly rubbed her belly, now expanded significantly beyond how much a human woman's belly would stretch. "Are you sure there's only one baby in there? You're bigger than Lily was when she dropped her twins."

Ilas smiled back, placing her hand over his on her swelling. "Yes, he's all on his own in there, but we talk a lot. I can link with him, a bit like I can with my sisters. We've talked about a name, and he's decided he likes Vya. Is that OK with you, Max? Dureena likes it, and so do I." She looked up at him, her anxiety to please him clearly showing in her eyes.

"If he likes it, then he's the one who has to live with it. Whatever you two--three--choose is fine by me." He reached out to pull Dureena into his arms again, wanting to hold them both as long as he could.

They sat in silence a little longer before Dureena finally sighed. "Wonderful as this is, we can't stay here all day. Lily wants us to join her, John, and Luke for a blessing ceremony for the twins. I think it's rather important to her, so we all ought to be looking our best." She reached up and kissed Max's cheek. "Which means that Ilas and I get to wear the new clothes you brought for us." Leaning across Max, she caressed Ilas' belly once more. "And maybe we'll hold something similar for Vya when he's born."

Ilas closed her hand over Dureena's, then reached out and brought Max's hand on top of theirs. She looked at them both, and her face glowed with happiness as she spoke, "I'm so glad that both of the parents of our son will be here to greet him when he's born." She looked lovingly at Dureena. "I know that Vya isn't genetically related to you Dureena, but believe me when I tell you that to me and to him, you are as much a parent to him as either Max or me."

Ilas grinned mischievously. "He knows how lucky he is, you know. He has one father, one mother and one...well, whatever I happen to feel like being at the time."

Demon sat on the rug on the terrace outside her rooms, tickling Marcus' belly as he laid on his back beside her. They still had an hour before they had to get ready for the blessing ceremony for Faylinn and Dasha, and were spending it enjoying the sunshine. The baby giggled as she tickled him and she chuckled back. She was very aware that Matthew was sitting on a bench above them, watching everything she did. She reached her hand up to him and pulled him down to sit on the rug next to her. Picking the baby up, she held him out to his father. "Why don't you play with him for a while?"

Gideon took the baby gingerly. He looked nervous and uncomfortable and held the child close and still. "I know that Alwyn showed me how to do this when he was born, but I'm out of practice. What if I drop him?"

"He won't break; at least, not easily. You can move a bit."

Matthew glared at her, but shifted his hands under the baby's arms and held him out at arms length, peering into his face. The baby stared straight back at him, his face serious. Father and son examined each other carefully. After a moment, Matthew spoke. "I just can't see it. He really doesn't look anything like me."

Demon laughed. "Take a good look at those eyes, Matthew--the shape is pure Gideon--and his mouth is exactly the same as yours."

Gideon considered. "Maybe, but at least he has your ears." He grinned at Demon, who laughed again.

Marcus started to chuckle in response to his mother's laughter. Matthew smiled and carefully put his son back down on the rug. "This is going to take some getting used to. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do here. Parenting classes weren't included at Earthforce academy."

"Well, the Vorlon didn't offer a course on it, either. I'm just making it up as I go along, and I'll probably screw up the poor little bastard for life."

Matthew put his arm around Demon's waist and pulled her close. "He may be a little bastard right now, but I aim to fix that. As soon as I can afford to buy his mother a wedding ring, that is."

Demon smiled and kissed him. "On the subject of money, when we leave Eriadne, we're going to need some and I have an idea."

Matthew pursed his lips. "You don't really need any. Once you're on board the Excalibur, you won't need money, and I can take care of everything until then. I do have *some* credits left from selling the book, and it shouldn't be that long before the back pay comes through now."

Demon considered how best to phrase her next comment. "Matthew, as much as I love you, I don't think I can cope with being totally dependent on you. It's just not in me to be like that. I'd feel useless and a burden, and I don't want to feel that way."

Matthew nodded. "OK. I can understand that, so what's your idea?"

Demon grinned at him. "Well, it's your idea, really. If you could get credits from selling one book from the library, there must be a lot of others we could sell. There's thousands of books in there, some of them must be valuable."

Matthew nodded again. "You're right, and you could make some serious credits out of some of the stuff in there. But if we do this, then the credits are yours. Well, yours and your sisters. You split the proceeds three ways."

"Four." Demon interrupted. Matthew looked at her quizzically. "Four ways, Matthew. I may not know where Angel is, or if I'll ever see her again, but she's entitled to her share of anything we take from this planet. She suffered as much as the rest of us when the Vorlon held us."

Gideon looked at her carefully, thinking that she would probably never see her sister again. He'd had searches running ever since Angel had escaped four months earlier. He had found no trace of her anywhere, but he didn't want to get into that with his lover on the one day they had to spend time together.

"OK, four ways, but those credits are yours. You do what you want with them. Of course, if you want to shower me with gifts, I'll try to cope." He grinned at her as she swatted his arm, then threw his head back and laughed aloud. "I've just realized! I'm about to become the boy toy of a rich, older woman."

The door to Lily's rooms was wide open, and delicate scents wafted out into the corridor. Soft music was playing, and the bright sunlight shining outside further accentuated the atmosphere of peace and joy.

Ilas, Max and Dureena arrived at the same time as Matthew and Deborah, from opposite directions, and Gideon was happy to see that the little Zanderi looked even better than during his last visit four months ago. She looked happier, healthier, and more relaxed than when he'd last seen her.

"Where's your dress uniform, Captain?" Max teased him, and the Captain was happy to tell him that uniforms were not allowed at this ceremony as per the host's, in this case specifically Lily's, decree. Instead, Gideon had put on the best civilian clothes he'd brought with him on this trip: a tight red sweater and black pants. Deborah at his arm was in her usual black, this time a simple long halter-neck dress with a long slit in the back. She carried Marcus against her shoulder. He was dressed in a blue romper-suit and was fast asleep.

Max had put on his best IPX jacket, while Dureena wore tight-fitting pants of reddish-brown leather and a white blouse with flaring sleeves gathered at the wrists, her cleavage accentuated by the tight vest of the same fabric and color as the pants. Ilas had chosen tight black leggings and a low-cut blouse of flowing sapphire blue material. The buttons of her black vest with silver rune embroideries were open, the material flowing down the sides of her enormous belly. Max had brought both outfits, along with other gifts, for his partners.

Entering, they were all warmly greeted by Lily, John, and Luke. John wore a matching suit of charcoal pants and a short jacket along with a purple sweater, while Luke had chosen a white shirt and light-gray jacket with black pants. Lily wore green; a dress with a definite medieval cut. The split front was laced at the top, with a dark red silk under-dress showing through. Long, tight sleeves ended in pointed tips on the back of her hands, while the puffed and split sleeves of the velvet overdress were gathered above her elbows.

Gideon's eyes darted over Lily's bare left hand after she'd greeted him, and he raised his eyebrows

almost imperceptibly as he looked at John. His friend silently mouthed, "Later," over Lily's shoulder. Gideon gave him a quick grin before assuming a more neutral expression. The center of the day's ritual, Faylinn and Dasha, were dressed in white, the color of the otherworld and of transitions, and were dozing in the arms of their fathers.

Kirrin and her daughter, Thikira, were already there, also in festive clothes, the little girl looking curiously at the sisters' babies.

Deborah laid the sleeping Marcus into Lily's lounging pit so she had her hands free but wouldn't have to worry about him falling, then returned to Gideon's side in the loose circle assembled at the center of the room.

"Dureena--we would be honored if you'd be the twins' Goddess-Mother," Lily said, after she had greeted them all. "You would be like a second mother or older sister to them, and I know you would teach them many things that would be of value to them later in their life."

Dureena looked at Lily for a few seconds, too moved to speak. Then she smiled, and said softly, "I appreciate your offer, and I'm honored by it, but," she looked at Ilas and smiled, "I have to decline. I'll be Vya's Goddess-Mother after he's born, sort of." Ilas and Max put their arms around Dureena and squeezed her tightly, smiling at her. She turned to John. "And I guess there's no doubt about who will be the Goddess-Father for them both, so I think it would make sense if Demon took the job of Goddess-Mother."

Demon smiled as they all looked at her, and gave Dureena an understanding nod as she replied, "I'd be honored."

John nodded at Gideon, the hint of a grin on his face. "Are you ready to take on the challenge, Captain?"

Matthew grinned at his XO. "You know I'm a gambler; I can't resist challenges." He turned to smile at Demon, who gave him a mock disapproving look, then looked at John, Lily, and Luke. "I'll do my best, but I'll have to get used to being called Goddess-Father."

Lily laughed. "Call it what you want, we know we made a good choice, anyway--with both of you." She turned to Dureena, Max, and Ilas, looking at them in turn. "And we would be happy to include all your teachings and talents in the education of our son and daughter. That is the reason why we have come together here and now. But first, although this is not a naming ceremony, I would like to explain to you why we chose these particular names."

She turned to Luke, who was rocking Faylinn gently. "I had been looking for names which would combine the meanings of mine and the father's name for each child. Luke, of course, means 'light'; Lilith 'spirit of the night', and Morgaine, my second name means 'sea-born'. Faylinn means 'fairy kingdom', which with my interest in legends was just too good to pass up. Sahar, in Arabic, means 'dawn'--the transition from night to day, from darkness to light--and as I could see after she was born, it also matched our daughter's red-blond hair." She softly stroked the red curls while continuing, "That's why she ended up with two names."

Then Lily turned to John, who was holding Dasha in his arms. "John means 'God is gracious'," Lily grinned up at him lasciviously. "And Dasha, in Greek, means 'Gift of God'. This is another reason why

Matthew makes a particularly good Goddess-Father for Dasha. Their names have the same meaning." She smoothed the black hair on the baby boy's head, then smiled at her listeners. "Now that the preliminaries are over, let's get back to business."

Lily stepped towards the round table, which had been moved to the center of the room, and from it, took two coverlets she had prepared earlier. They consisted of two layers of velvet with soft padding between them. Both were white, with Faylinn's name embroidered on one in green, and Dasha's name embroidered on the other in red. "These coverlets are not complete. As you can see, the yarn ties to hold them together are not yet tied. We would like all of you to think about something that's important to you or a quality you value, and make a wish for Faylinn and Dasha. Name it while tying the yarns, thereby tying your blessings into the coverlet."

She started with Demon, who was on her left. She moved in front of her and held out the coverlets to her. Demon thought for a moment, then took a pair of untied yarn ends at Dasha's coverlet and said, "For you, Dasha, I wish that you will always be surrounded by the family that loves you," while tying them. Then she did the same with Faylinn's coverlet. "Faylinn, I wish you a keen sense of justice." Lily smiled at her eldest sister.

Matthew was next. "Dasha, I wish you an instinctive sense of who you can trust. Faylinn, I wish you the strength to go on even in dire circumstances." Lily nodded her thanks, then stepped up to Ilas.

"Dasha, I wish you the ability to adapt to any situation, no matter how impossible it may seem. Faylinn, I wish you the ability to recognize true love when it arrives." Again Lily smiled, then held the coverlets out to Dureena.

"Dasha, for you I wish something I only recently gained--the freedom to choose your own destiny. Faylinn, for you the strength to fight for what is important to you."

Max wished Dasha, "Enough wealth to never have to worry, but not so much that you never have to strive, or in other words: Live long and prosper." Not only Demon and Lily chuckled, but the other humans too--the 20th century TV series, 'Star Trek', from which this motto had originated, still enjoyed regular reruns on TV. Max grinned, then continued, "Faylinn, I wish you a keen, cunning mind. May it serve you and your loved ones well."

"Ouch," Dureena murmured, "Poor loved ones," causing laughter all around.

Kirrin gently nudged her daughter, Thikira, to go first, and Lily hunched down, holding out the coverlets to her. The little Brakiri girl tied the yarn ends with the words, "Dasha, I wish you to have as much joy finding out things about nature as I have, because it is so much fun. Faylinn, I wish you to have as much joy in school as I and the other children have here with Lily."

She shyly smiled at Lily, who leaned forward and kissed the crease on her forehead. "If my children are such eager students as the ones I teach now, they will bring out the best in every teacher." She smiled at the Brakiri girl and stood again, holding the coverlets out to her mother. Kirrin had become her closest friend among the Brakiri in the years she'd spent on Eriadne, and had helped her not only with teaching the village children, but also with accepting her memory loss and going on with life. She owed the older woman a great deal.

Kirrin took the next pair of yarn ties into her hands. "Dasha, I wish you the ability to find new friends in unexpected places." She gave Lily the tiniest smile as she looked at her, then tied the yarns at Faylinn's coverlet. "For you Faylinn, the ability to listen to people's hearts rather than their words."

Finally, Lily arrived at the twins' fathers, who handed the babies to their newly appointed Goddess-Mother and Goddess-Father so they could tie the yarns.

John looked at the yarn ends thoughtfully for a second, then said, "Dasha, I wish you an inherent sense of when it's time to follow the rules, and when it's time to break them for a higher purpose. Faylinn, I wish you a sense of humor to help break down walls of prejudice and ignorance."

Luke softly smiled at Lily as she walked up to him, then let his eyes rest on the coverlet. "Dasha, for you I wish the ability to ease other's pain. Faylinn, for you the ability to make people smile."

Finally, it was Lily's turn, and she gave Dasha's coverlet to Luke, and Faylinn's to John. She took another pair of untied yarn ends at Dasha's coverlet and thought for a moment. "Dasha, I wish that you'll remember everybody who's ever loved you" While she bound the yarn ends of her daughter's coverlet, she said, "Faylinn, I wish you the nobility to share all the gifts you've been given today and will be given in the future."

She smiled up at John and Luke and kissed each of them briefly as she took the coverlets back, then gave them to Demon and Matthew after they'd lain the twins into their cots, to enwrap their Goddess-Children in the blessings of their family and friends.

Gideon noticed that on each coverlet there was one piece of yarn left untied. No one asked or said anything, but he realized that Lily must have counted Angel in when she had made them. On the one hand, he couldn't help but admire how the three remaining sisters stubbornly held on to their belief that Angel was innocent, as well as to their hope that one day they would be together again. On the other hand, he also knew it was exactly this stubbornness that could ultimately lead to a lot of problems if he managed to find Angel and turn her over to a court. He shook the thought off. The chances that Angel was still alive were slim, and even if she were, the chances of actually finding her were even slimmer. Better to celebrate the present than to brood on a very unlikely future.

He accepted the glass of local wine Luke handed him, and everybody clinked their glasses together as Lily said to the circle of loved ones, "Blessed be."

Gideon put his arm around Deborah's waist and pulled her to him, whispering in her ear, "Did you hear that? I'm a gift from God. I hope you're duly appreciative."

Deborah snorted her amusement and whispered back, "Well, my name means 'the bee', so watch it, or you'll get stung."

It was evening when John and Luke carried the twins into the nursery, where Kirrin would watch out for them and Marcus while their parents were at dinner. For a few seconds, they stood beside the cot their two children shared, watching them sleep.

"Finally, to be able to be part of this family. I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful," John whispered.

Luke softly smiled at him as he whispered back, "Neither can I."

John tore his eyes off their children and carefully searched Luke's face. "Are you really sure?"

Luke's smile spread. "This is what I want more than anything else--to be with you and Lily and the twins. And being able to discover new worlds as a by-product doesn't hurt, either." He looked down at the twins again, then continued, "My sister is a woman who knows who she is and what she wants, and she's never hesitated to tell me when she thought I was doing something stupid in the past." He looked into John's eyes. "I'll have to tell her, but I guess she's content with her new life, so I'd better be as well, or I'll never live it down."

John grinned and put his hand on Luke's shoulder and they went back into Lily's room, where the lady of their hearts was already waiting in front of the door, wearing yet another breathtaking green outfit. For a moment, they just stood there, looking at her.

"I swear you got even more beautiful since the birth. Something is missing, though." John walked up to Lily who had lifted her eyebrows at the suggestion, taking something out of his jacket pocket and holding it out to her.

Lily looked curiously at the velvet pouch he held out, then questioningly up at him, as she took it into her hands and opened it. She peeked inside and gasped. She looked up at John, then at Luke, who shrugged his shoulders in a 'I don't know anything about this' fashion, then she peeked back into the pouch, swallowing.

"Take it out," John said softly, with a smile.

She did, turning the pouch upside down and letting its content fall into the hollow of her left hand, revealing a delicate golden ring with a single emerald inset at its widest point. She stared at it, as John took it out of her hand and slid it onto her left ring finger, holding her hand lightly in his. It fit perfectly.

Lily looked up at him with tears in her eyes, unable to say anything.

"I hope you like it. When I saw it, I instantly thought of you. I know that you gave away all your jewelry, so I wanted to get you something." He looked down at the ring, his smile becoming a bit sheepish. "But to be honest, it wasn't me who bought it for you in the end. It was Matthew." He explained about Earthforce's and his own financial situation, and how Gideon had ended up buying both the ring for Demon and the one for her.

Lily shook her head and said in a voice raw with emotion, "I can never be grateful enough to Matthew for doing this, and I absolutely love my ring, John." She leaned up on tiptoes and kissed him softly but deeply, whispering, "Thank you," when she let go.

Then she reached out to Luke, who was still standing a few steps behind John, smiling. "You are aware, of course, that it's your turn next, Dr. Raven?" she asked teasingly.

Luke turned to John in mock exasperation as he took Lily's right hand. "I won't forget this. You started it with a ring, and we'll both end up without a single shirt to wear."

Lily grinned lasciviously and purred, "Don't tempt me."

They took a little detour on their way to the dining room because Lily wanted to show John the latest tapestry she and Ilas had made. It was the second one on this side of the corridor, while the opposite wall was already filled with thirteen tapestries telling the witches' story, from their abduction by the Vorlon, to the arrival of the Excalibur.

Lily led John up to it, looking at him expectantly. "What do you think?"

John looked up at the large tapestry, which, like the previous ones, was incredibly realistic. It showed Demon, Ilas and Lilith in the center, their advanced pregnancies obvious, with their partners standing beside them and Sarah Chambers and Alwyn a bit farther back to each side, while Alwyn's ship floated above him on the right edge, the golden dragons clearly visible on its wings. On the opposite side, above Sarah, another Technomage ship--Galen's--floated, not much more than a shadow. On the top center, Angel's and Nikarran's faces floated side by side, with the ship they had used to escape rising into the sky at a sharp angle between them. Along the middle of the tapestry's lower edge, Lucas lay on his stomach on a stretcher, head turned towards the viewers, mocking them despite his immobility, foreboding his escape.

"It's incredible," John breathed, still unable to grasp how they managed to make such realistic-looking tapestries.

"Well, this and the last one took a lot more time than the others because Angel," Lily's voice faltered for a moment, then she continued, her eyes looking at the image of her lost sister, "wasn't here to help us coordinate our moves."

John and Luke looked at each other over Lily's head, then John squeezed her shoulder and said softly, "I'm sure Nikarran is taking good care of her." [There's no need to tell you and your sisters that all evidence points toward her disappearing or dying. Not before we're absolutely sure.]

Lily sighed and tore her eyes off the tapestry, nodding. "I know." She forced herself to smile as she looked up at her men. "Well, we had better go if we still want something to eat."

When Deborah came out of her bedroom before dinner, Gideon's knees went weak at the sight of her. The black strapless dress, in a matte clinging material, outlined every curve of her body. The tube of material started just above her cleavage and clung tightly to below her hips. It covered her completely, but she might as well have been naked for all it concealed of her shape. Every curve and line was displayed and emphasized. It was split to mid-thigh to allow her room to walk and through the split, Gideon could see that she was wearing the black stockings he loved so much. When Deborah walked, he could just see a flash of black lace at the top, and it was obvious that she didn't have another thing on under that dress. It fitted so tightly that the tiniest scrap of material would have shown.

After a few moments, he remembered to breathe. "I have no idea why you put something on that you know I'll just take straight off again."

Deborah laughed and flowed against him. "Well, you'll just have to wait. I'm not going down to dinner in my stockings and nothing else."

"So you're going to make me sit through dinner with a raging hard-on? I'm not sure I can even walk that far just now!" Deborah laughed again and pulled away, turning to walk ahead of him to the

door. Watching the movement of her butt under the dress left Gideon trying to decide whether the view was better from the front or the back, but sure that he was going to be in acute discomfort all through dinner.

They went to the main dining room to find the others already gathered. Max had a huge grin on his face as he stood with one arm around Ilas and the other round Dureena. Ilas was dressed all in blue, with tight blue pants showing the large bulge in her abdomen, [She must be due any time now; it's been a year since our first visit,] blue shirt, and blue hair piled intricately on top of her head. Gideon wondered if she arranged it like that or just grew it into place. Dureena looked incredibly feminine in a tight-fitting red blouse and skirt. For a moment, Gideon faltered, as the color made him think of Angel. He felt Deborah tense under his arm around her waist and knew that the same thought had occurred to her.

Matheson and Raven stood on either side of Lily, both with their arms around her--theson's around her waist, Raven's around her shoulders. Lily wore an emerald green dress, cut low enough to display the tattoo in her cleavage. The dress was tight-fitting to the waist, with a full flowing skirt. The color exactly matched the emerald ring she wore on her left hand. Gideon was unable to resist and moved across to Lily, taking her hand in his and lifting it to his mouth, kissing the finger on which she wore the ring. She smiled up at him, then stood on the tips of her toes to kiss his cheek. Neither of them said a word.

Gideon was surrounded by some of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen, but to him, none of them came close to Deborah. Her spectacular figure was emphasized by her dress, and her fair skin, and pale gold hair were highlighted by the color. She wore her hair up, showing her long slender neck to advantage, and glinting in the light against the darkness of her dress, she wore the ring he'd given her.

He took revenge during dinner, eating with one hand, while he slid the other hand between her thighs and stroked the soft skin there, as they sat and talked. Sometimes, he just rested his hand, at others he slid his finger under the top of her stocking and stroked softly. Gideon waited until she was in the middle of a complex discussion with Max on the finer points of interpretation of a verse in Chaucer before he slid his hand into her curls and slipped a finger inside her. Deborah's smile flickered for a moment, and she clasped her legs together under the table, but she didn't miss a beat in her argument. The only real sign of her response was that both nipples suddenly stood out through her tight fitting dress.

Gideon looked around the table to see if anyone had noticed and realized that there wasn't a single person sitting there who had both hands above the table. They could probably have run the Excalibur for a month on the energy generated by the sexual tension around that table.

Deborah got her revenge soon afterwards. He was talking to John about the refit they were due when he felt her hand slide up his thigh and firmly grasp his balls through his pants. Gideon made a great effort and managed not to grunt as she started to massage them, while she toyed with a piece of fruit with her other hand and appeared entirely focused on John's description of how the new crew quarters would be laid out.

Gideon lay on his back, with his arms behind his head. Lying on a rug on the terrace outside Deborah's rooms, he looked up at the stars overhead. He'd done some research since his earlier visits and could now place most of the major stars and nebulae. He was waiting for Deborah to join him. They'd returned from dinner a few moments before, and as soon as the door was closed, he'd pulled her

to him and started to remove her dress. [Oh, God, that dress.]

By the time Gideon had gotten her back to her rooms, he had been so aroused that he was ready to tear that damned dress off her and take her hard against the wall. Then Deborah had calmly announced that she wouldn't be a minute and had pushed him out onto the terrace. So now he was lying, staring up at the stars, trying to think of anything other than the fact that he had an erection that could knock the Excalibur out of orbit, if it passed directly overhead.

He heard movement from the French windows and looked over to see Deborah emerging onto the terrace. She'd turned down the lights in the living room, so all he could see at first was her silhouette. Then she stepped into the light that shone above the doorway and Gideon heard a moan. [Oh, God--that was me.] She was wearing a completely sheer black...something, which fell to her bare feet. Under it, he could see she wore a bra and high leg briefs, which somehow made her look sexier than she did before and made her legs look like they went on forever. Deborah's hair hung loose and as she moved to stand over him, it dropped forward and almost hid her face. She slid gracefully to her knees, and without saying a word, leaned forward and kissed him. She then started to silently remove his clothes, pushing his hands away when he tried to help.

When Gideon was naked, she encouraged him to slowly remove the sheer black covering and her underwear and they made slow, passionate love under the stars. When they had finished and Deborah lay on top of him, still breathing heavily, with him holding her tightly against his chest, he laughed quietly. She pushed herself up until she was sitting upright, astride him, with him still buried deep inside her. She smiled down at him and asked, "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking, when you join me on the Excalibur, we had better make sure our quarters are well shielded, or the entire ship will grind to a halt every time we make love--and I do mean 'grind'. Either that, or I'll have to keep you permanently pregnant to stop you from sending." Gideon paused. "Which reminds me of something I should have mentioned when I got here this morning."

He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek. "When I first came to Eriadne, I had no idea that I would end up making love to the most beautiful woman in the galaxy." Gideon watched as Deborah smiled and turned her face into his hand, closing her eyes as she rubbed her cheek against his palm. "I got you pregnant because I hadn't kept up my contraceptive shots. I hadn't thought I needed to, but this time I didn't want to risk getting you pregnant again unless and until you want to. So my shots are all up to date, and there's no chance that I could have knocked you up today."

Deborah grinned down at him. "Well, that makes two of us. I got Luke to give me a long-term shot soon after Marcus was born. I can't get pregnant again for at least another eight months."

She lifted herself off of him and curled up alongside him, joining him in looking up at the stars. "I've always wanted to go to the stars, Matthew. As a young girl on Earth, I used to look at the night sky and wonder what it would be like to go to other worlds. Then I was brought to one, but it seemed I'd no more hope of leaving this place than I had of leaving Earth in the 20th century. So I used to look at the night sky and wonder where Earth was, but for the last year, I've watched the sky and wondered where you were."

Gideon had a sudden image of Deborah standing on her terrace, dressed in black, her long, pale hair falling around her shoulders, as she held his son in her arms and gazed at the stars. The beauty of the image almost overwhelmed him, and he felt a sudden surge of love for her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently. "Well, Odysseus has come back for his Penelope, and this time she didn't need

his old dog to recognize him."

Deborah laughed as she pulled herself closer to him. "And this Penelope has no intention of staying at home weaving any more. She's going with her Odysseus, and if he meets any enchantresses, she'll take care of them herself. We'll just see who ends up turned into a pig this time!"

Gideon laughed aloud and kissed her passionately, before saying, "When I come back, we'll sail beyond the sunset together." Then he pointed to the stars and showed her where Earth was and all of the major stars and civilizations, and promised to take her to every one.

Gideon was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, knowing he should move. The shuttle was due to leave, and they'd promised to join the others for breakfast, to go over the last plans for the women joining the Excalibur, but he didn't want to move. Deborah's head lay on his shoulder, his left arm was wrapped around her, and she had entwined her leg over his, pulling herself close so he could feel her body touching his from shoulder to ankle. They had just made love--slowly, passionately, but carefully, both of them somewhat sore from the previous day's excesses.

He lifted his hand to stroke her hair and kissed the top of her head. "We ought to get up."

"Mmm," was the only verbal response he got, but he felt Deborah's hand slide down from his chest toward his belly.

"Stop it. It's no use, anyway. You've killed him." He could feel her laughter vibrating along the length of his body.

"Wanna bet?" Gideon felt her head start to move down his chest, and he grabbed her hair quickly, pulling back gently, until she stopped and looked up at him.

"It's dead certain, and dead is definitely the right word. Come back up here, and kiss something that can respond."

Deborah pulled herself back up the bed and knelt alongside him, gazing down at him, smiling. She leaned forward and kissed his lips, first with hers, then opening her mouth to run her tongue gently along his lips, pushing slowly between them, until her tongue met his. The kiss went on, lingering, deepening, until they both broke for breath.

She sat back on her heels again, her hand playing with the hair on his chest and his nipple, then she said softly, "We ought to get up."

"I know." Neither of them moved.

Deborah sighed and snuggled down next to him. "When do you think you'll be back?"

"In about a month. We need to get some of the crew quarters refitted, including mine. There's no way we'd both fit in my bunk." Deborah was silent. After a few moments, Gideon said, "You know, sometimes you think so loud I can hear the cogs whirring. What's the problem?"

She sat up and knelt beside him again, reaching out to stroke his chest, but not meeting his eyes. "Matthew, how long has it been since you shared your quarters with anyone?"

Gideon considered. "Not since I was an Ensign, which was nearly ten years ago. Why?"

Deborah still avoided his gaze. "I haven't shared a room with anyone since I was at school, and that's rather more than ten years."

He snorted. "Just a bit." Gideon watched her smile.

"What I was thinking is that if we try and live together in your quarters, with Marcus, well," she looked at his face and smiled again, "one of us is going to get murdered within a week."

He looked up at her in surprise. "So are you saying you've changed your mind? You don't want to come with me?"

Deborah looked horrified. "No! I want to come with you. Of course, I want to come with you! I just wondered if it might make sense if I had separate quarters. That way we can be together when we want, but we get space and time away from each other if we need it." She laid back down beside him and pulled herself close. "But I'd want to spend every night with you, and wake up with you every morning."

Gideon considered what she'd said. She had a point. He was used to a certain amount of privacy and often worked in his quarters. Having her around all the time would be nice, but could be damned distracting. Having a baby in there as well could be impossible.

"You're right; that would probably be best. I'll just have to arrange to have you close by, so that I can get at you whenever I want you." He sat up quickly and pushed her down onto her back, then continued, "Which is going to be often." He bent over her and kissed her, then rolled back to lie on his side, his head propped on one arm.

"But seriously, are you sure about this? No, don't answer at once. Have you considered what you're giving up?" Gideon waved his free hand. "All this? The castle, the open air, servants, your whole lifestyle will change. You'll be spending the next few years in a big tin can. Are you sure that's the way you want to live? Are you sure that's the way you want Marcus to live?"

Deborah looked up at him and nodded. "I've thought about all that, and yes, I still want to come with you. I know we'll be inside the ship a lot of the time, but it's a big ship. I saw that when I was up there. I guess we'll stop at planets sometimes, and there'll be opportunities to visit amazing new places. Marcus will get chances to see and do things he'd never do here. I know that there won't be many other children around, but his cousins will be there, so he won't be totally alone. So yes, I'm sure. I just want to be with you, Matthew. I hate sitting here, not knowing when you're going to be able to visit, or how long you'll be able to stay."

She smiled mischievously. "And have you considered how useful having an unregistered empath around might be? I know that I don't have the abilities John has, but from what I understand, he's not allowed to use those abilities most of the time. I don't have those restrictions. How useful would it be to know if someone is lying to you, or if they're angry, happy, sad, whatever, about what you're telling them? I can do that."

Gideon realized that he hadn't even considered whether Deborah and her sisters could be useful to his mission. He'd been entirely focused on making sure that she and his son could be with him. Reconsidering it from this point of view, Deborah would be a hell of an asset. Having a shape-shifter

around could be useful, too. When he started to think about uses for Lily's abilities, he stopped dead. He still struggled with that concept. But to go into first contact with a new species with an empath at his side who could tell him how they were feeling, if they were hostile or friendly, if they were lying or telling the truth, could be a huge advantage.

Gideon leaned over and kissed Deborah again, running his hand over her breast as he did so. "You're hired, and if you'd care to sit in on any poker games I get into and tell me when someone is bluffing..."

She slapped his hand away and laughed. "If I'm hired, I want to know how much I get paid, and poker games will cost extra."

The Captain pursed his lips. "Well, if we're talking fees, I'll send you the bill for my services for the last twenty-four hours. I don't work cheap, and you've had a hell of a lot of servicing."

He dropped his head over hers and settled into a long, satisfying kiss, broken only when they both heard a loud banging on the door to her living room. They both listened as Dureena's voice sounded out. "Are you two ever going to come down to breakfast? You'll be lucky to get any food if you don't get a move on!"

Gideon looked down at Deborah. "We really ought to get up."

Max handed the data cards around the breakfast table. Deborah, Ilas, and Lily each took theirs and looked at them. Each card had full identity details for each woman. Deborah looked over at Gideon, a puzzled smile on her face. "I don't understand. What is this?"

Gideon explained that they would need proper identity records if they were to travel with an ISA Explorer ship. "So we made some up for you."

He grinned and continued. "John did some digging around in the databanks and found a ship that disappeared back at the time of the Shadow Wars. The Heinlein was a colony ship on its way to Deneb IV," he nodded at Luke, a resident of that planet, "when it disappeared in hyperspace. Fortunately, the passengers weren't all human, several species were on board. John and Max got into the records--I don't want to know how they did that--and added three additional passengers. We entered your real names, but we had to guess your ages. The story we've concocted is that you escaped in a life pod as the Heinlein dropped out of hyperspace in this system. Your life pod crash-landed here, where you were taken in by the Brakiri and moved into the castle. You were the only survivors. You'll need to brief the village elders on the story, so they back it up if anyone ever checks up."

Gideon paused, thinking briefly that he must get Luke to ask the elders to say that only three women had crash-landed. But not now. He promised himself he'd call Luke from the Excalibur, as soon as he got back on board. He continued, "But that shouldn't happen. All you need to do is to press your thumb onto the card and it will register your print and gene pattern. Then you're officially the person the card says you are."

Demon looked down at the card she held. The date of birth was shown as 2241, which made her twenty-eight. She looked over at Matthew and smiled. "Did you decide how old I was?" He nodded. She looked back down at the card and smiled again. "Close enough to be feasible, and low enough to be

flattering. What a politician you are."

She leaned over to look at Lily's card and saw that Lily's age worked out as twenty-four. "You don't know how old you are, do you, Lily?"

Lily shook her head. "Well I didn't, but I do now." She grinned up at Demon and her men.

"What about you, Ilas? How old did they guess you at?"

Ilas held the card for Demon to see. "Oh, twenty-one. Well, it's a bit on the high side, but believable, I guess."

Max looked at Demon, then back at Ilas. "On the high side? How old are you, Ilas?"

Ilas frowned and considered. "I've lost track. Do you remember, Demon?"

Demon thought about it. "Well, given what the Vorlon told us, and how long we've been here, I suppose you must be over fourteen by now."

Max's eyes opened wide. He looked horrified. "Fourteen? You're joking, please tell me that you're joking!"

Demon shook her head. "No. The Vorlon told us that Ilas was about six or seven, when we first came together. Add the year they held us, and six years since, and she must be around fourteen by now, but we were told that her species is mature at ten or eleven. Is there a problem?"

Demon looked around to see that Matthew was laughing quietly, while Luke and John were doing their best to conceal smiles.

Max burst out. "Problem?! I'm old enough to be her father. Hell, I'm old enough to be her grandfather! I can't think of a planet in the galaxy where having sex with a thirteen-year-old is legal, and knowing that the mother of my child is fourteen makes me feel like a dirty old man."

Dureena grinned. "But we already knew that, Max."

Max whipped his head round and glared at her. Ilas let out a small whimper of distress. "What's the matter, Max? Did I do something wrong?"

Demon glared at the men, and the laughter subsided. She spoke gently to her sister. "No, darling. You didn't do anything wrong. It's just that they didn't know that your species grows up quickly. And the age shown on your new identity card is a lot easier for most people to accept, so you'd better remember what it is, just in case you get asked."

Max was holding Ilas close, comforting her and assuring her that she was perfect and that he loved her; it didn't matter how old she was. Ilas was soon all smiles again.

Demon watched as Matthew reluctantly rose from the table. She saw John follow and realized it was time. She told herself not to get upset, this time it wouldn't be so long, and the next time she saw Matthew, he'd never have to leave her again.

Matthew turned to her and spoke. "It's time to go. Trace will be getting impatient, and we have a schedule to meet." He held his hand out to Demon, then turned to address the table. "John and I should

only be gone for about a month. That gives you plenty of time to get everything you need sorted and packed. When we get back, we'll only be stopping overnight, then we'll be heading for Mars. Max, don't get carried away with those ruins and try to fill the shuttle with samples." They had decided before their arrival that Max would stay on Eriadne for the month, to be there with Ilas when she had her baby. Only Matthew and John were leaving this time.

Demon, Luke, and Lily rose, and joined Matthew and John as they left the dining room. The others had said their goodbyes earlier.

They walked down to the shuttle in silence, Demon holding Matthew's hand tightly, while John had his arm around Lily's waist, holding her close, and Luke's arm was draped loosely around John's shoulder. When they arrived at the foot of the ramp, Matthew swung Demon around until she was clasped close to him, his arms squeezing her almost breathless. He kissed her long and deeply, until they both heard a throat clearing above them and broke free. Trace Miller stood at the top of the ramp and smiled apologetically down at them.

"Sorry, Captain, but if we're going to make that rendezvous with the Medusa, we need to leave right now."

Demon looked into Matthew's eyes as he spoke. "It's only a month. It'll soon pass, and when I come back next time, you can come with me. I'll never have to leave you again." He kissed her forehead gently and let her go. He and John strode up the ramp together and Demon, Luke, and Lily watched the door of the shuttle close behind them.

Demon turned to the others and sighed. "Just one month. One more month--and it will still feel like an eternity."

Lily held out her hand and Demon took it. The sisters returned to the castle, comforting each other through their link, with Luke walking alongside Lily, his arm holding her close.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

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