

# The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble - Part 2: Goodbyes and Hellos

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His pounding headache is Matthew's smallest problem...

## Chapter 3

Gideon watched in amazement as Deborah tore herself out of his arms and ran to the back of the church, pulling the shadowy figure out of the alcove. He was convinced that she'd made a terrible mistake as the figure emerged into the light, and he could see the person more clearly. It was a woman, yes, and she was roughly the same height as Angel and had the same color hair, but there the resemblance ended. The woman, who Deborah now held tightly in her arms, was filthy and emaciated. The black hair was matted with dirt, clumped into knots and tangles. Her body was almost skeletal, the filthy clothes hanging loosely off a frame that showed far too much bone and not enough flesh.

Gideon started to walk towards the two women standing holding each other tightly, aware that Matheson was walking by his side, but that the others in the church had frozen in place after turning to watch Deborah and the stranger. At that moment, the woman's face turned towards him. Deborah had pushed back the matted hair and turned the woman's head to cradle it against her shoulder. Gideon stopped dead in his tracks. Beneath the grime and despite the bones that showed so much more than they should, he now recognized her. It was Angel. Both sisters were sobbing as they held each other tightly, and for a moment, he didn't know what to do. Then he heard a hiss from his right and looked to see Dureena staring at Angel, her teeth bared in fury. The Captain then knew what he had to do.

Gideon raised his commlink to his mouth and keyed the call sign for Mars Security. He spoke quietly into the bracelet, asking that they send someone to arrest Angel. Feeling a hand touch him, he looked to see that Matheson had grasped his arm, something he rarely did. John whispered, "Matthew, no. Don't do this."

He looked sadly at Matheson and spoke softly. "I have to, John. I promised." No one else had heard him make the call.

He approached the two sisters slowly, watching Deborah stroke Angel's matted hair, wondering how she'd ended up in such a state. Where was Nikarran? He was supposed to be looking after her, how had he let this happen to her? To see this once proud and beautiful woman reduced to a dirty bag of bones was tragic. How had it happened? For a brief moment, his hatred of Lucas Buck flared. This was Buck's fault, he had done this to Angel. Then the focus of his hatred shifted. To himself. He, Matthew Gideon, was as responsible for this as anyone else, maybe more so. His actions had led to Angel bringing Lucas back at the cost of Dureena's baby's life, to Lucas kidnapping Angel then trying to do the same to Deborah, to Angel fleeing for her life and ending up in such appalling circumstances. His fault, his responsibility, and now he was going to deliver the final blow to this poor woman, to this victim of his actions. He was going to have her arrested for murder.

As he approached, Angel's eyes opened and Gideon could see how the once clear blue eyes, which had flashed with fire and energy, were now dull and lifeless. Then she focused on him and her face filled with fear. She started to whimper and struggle against Deborah, trying to break loose from her sister's arms. "No! Please, don't hurt me. Lucas, don't hurt me. I didn't mean it to happen like that, I'm so sorry, I never wanted you to be hurt, please, Lucas, don't..."

Gideon was appalled. She'd mistaken him for Lucas and thought he had come to punish her. But how wrong was she? He might not be Lucas, but the punishment he'd set in train might be as bad as anything that Lucas could do. But why would Lucas want to punish her? For deserting him?

He reached out his hand, intending to reassure her that he wasn't Lucas, but wondering how much reassurance that would really be. Angel shrank back from his touch and finally managed to break free from her sister's grasp, throwing herself out through the door of the church into the street beyond. Gideon heard Deborah scream Angel's name as he followed, running hard, hearing footsteps at his side and behind him, but barely aware of them. His attention was entirely focused on the woman fleeing ahead of him. She ran fast but had no stamina; her weakness showed as she first stumbled, then fell in a heap less than fifty meters from the church door.

When Gideon reached Angel, she was flat on her face, unmoving on the ground. He knelt by her side, looking up to see Matheson opposite him. Carefully turning her over, he saw that she was unconscious, her last desperate dash having completely drained her of energy. He started to lift her gently, and Matheson reached out his hand. "Let me help."

Gideon shook his head as he straightened, holding Angel close to his chest. "It's OK, she's not heavy." Not heavy at all. It was like holding a child in his arms. He remembered her as she'd been on Eriadne, slim, almost thin, but with the slenderness of a willow, supple and strong. It now felt as if he were holding a bundle of dry twigs, if he held her too tightly, he might snap the fragile bones that showed all too clearly in her arms and shoulders.

The Captain turned to find Deborah and Sarah standing behind him, both eager to help. He spoke gently to Deborah as she reached out to touch her sister's face where it rested against his shoulder. "Let's get her back into the church and let Sarah have a look at her." She nodded and followed him, her

hand resting on Angel's shoulder as they walked.

Taking Angel inside, Gideon lowered her to a bench and stood back to let Sarah examine her. Alwyn was now holding Marcus, and Luke held Faylinn in one arm while his other was around Lily, who sobbed desperately into his shoulder. Max, Ilas and Dureena stood in a group further back, still holding Vya and Dasha, watching events unfold. Max had his arm tight around Ilas' shoulders, hugging her as she trembled, while he held Dureena's arm with his other hand, holding her back.

As Sarah examined Angel, Gideon turned to Deborah, who was standing close by. Her dress was ruined, covered in dirt where she had held Angel against her. Somewhere in her chase after him and Angel she'd lost her sandals, and she now stood barefoot beside him. He lifted a hand to her face, using his thumb to wipe away a greasy black mark left from where Angel's head had made contact with her chin. He spoke softly. "Maybe you should have worn black after all."

Deborah leaned into his chest, dropping her head to his shoulder. "What have I done, Matthew? This is all my fault."

Gideon lifted her chin and looked her in the eyes. "Your fault? How do you figure that?"

"I sent her away. I trusted Nikarran to take care of her. Where is he? Did he steal the jewelry we gave them and abandon her? How could she have ended up like this? I should have trusted you; I should have let you take care of her. Oh God, Matthew I should have done anything other than trust that bastard! If I ever find him I'll kill him!"

Gideon pulled her head back into his shoulder and stroked her hair as she cried. "Let's not jump to conclusions. We don't know what happened. Nikarran didn't seem the type to steal from Angel and abandon her. The main thing is that we've found her and can help her now." A shaft of guilt drove through him as he spoke, and Deborah's head came up sharply as she felt it. She frowned at him, but before she could ask him about it, Gideon spoke over her shoulder to the others standing behind.

"Max, why don't you and Luke take Lily, Ilas, Dureena and the children back to the hotel. Alwyn, would you take Marcus with them?" Gideon watched as Max gradually persuaded Ilas and Dureena that they could do nothing to help and that Vya would be better off taken away from all the excitement. They reluctantly agreed and left but Luke's attempt to persuade Lily to go with them failed completely. Luke finally left with Faylinn, while Lily moved to stand with John, who wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

Chambers looked up from where she'd been examining Angel. "Can someone get me some water?" Matheson darted away towards where the minister still stood on the steps of the altar, watching the drama with undisguised interest. He and Matheson left together and came back a moment later with a glass.

In the meantime, Sarah had told Lily, Gideon and Deborah that Angel appeared essentially unharmed. "She's suffering from malnutrition and more importantly, dehydration. We need to get some fluids into her quickly, orally will help but I really need to set up an intravenous drip for her." She took the glass from Matheson and started to drip the water gently onto Angel's dry, cracked lips. Angel's tongue emerged to lick the water drops away, and as her mouth opened, Chambers dripped more water into her. Angel's eyes were fluttering, but she still hadn't come round properly. Chambers looked up at Gideon. "The best place to treat her would be on the Excalibur in Medbay. Can you get a shuttle down here?"

Gideon froze. He knew it was pointless calling for a shuttle. Security would be arriving at any minute and would take Angel away. They would make sure that she was treated and cleaned up, but how was he going to explain this to Deborah? He wasn't sure how she would react to the news that he'd arranged for her sister's arrest, but he knew that it would be bad. Maybe as bad as it could get. He was responsible for the state her sister was in, he'd abused the girl verbally, he'd half-raped her, he'd driven her into the crime that she'd committed, and now he'd called Security. Deborah had every reason to hate him for what he'd done. Except that she was now his wife. Would that count for anything?

Before he could answer Sarah's question, the outer door flew open and three people walked in. Gideon was unsettled to see that the first was Lieutenant Carr, who he'd met on a previous visit to Mars. They hadn't got on that well together before, but he knew her to be competent if somewhat stubborn and acerbic. Two uniformed Security men accompanied her.

Gideon winced at Carr's opening words. "So what do you want this time, Captain? Last time I met up with you in a church, I got shot. When I heard you'd called, I could hardly wait to get here and see if I could return the favor."

He took a deep breath and did one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life. Still holding Deborah tightly against him, Gideon asked Carr to arrest Angel on a charge of accessory to murder. He felt Deborah go rigid in his arms as she heard his words and heard Lily's shriek of pain from where Matheson stood holding her. Chambers stared up at him in horror, apparently unable to believe what she'd just heard.

Carr nodded. "OK, we'll take her downtown and charge her, but you'll need to come with us to make a statement. We'll need facts, evidence and witnesses if you want this to stick." She turned to the two men who accompanied her. "Take her in, boys. Looks like you'll have to carry her."

Angel had been rousing as they spoke but still looked dazed and unaware as she lay on the bench. As the Security men moved to pick her up, Deborah broke loose from Gideon's arms. She didn't speak or look at him, but he could see that she had locked herself under control, her face completely blank and her voice expressionless as she spoke to Carr.

"I'm going with her." She towered over Carr and stared down at the policewoman, imperiously.

Gideon flinched, thinking, [Demon indeed, and on her very worst behavior,] and watched as Carr bridled.

"Says who? I don't know who the hell you think you are, lady, but I decide who accompanies prisoners, and I don't see any reason why I should allow you to come with us."

"I'm her sister." Deborah's voice was softer but still toneless.

"And I'm her great uncle twice removed. Try the other leg, lady, it's got bells on it." Carr spun on her heel as her companions lifted Angel from the bench.

Gideon intervened, before Carr could leave. "She's telling the truth Lieutenant, they are sisters. Please, let her go with Angel." He'd hoped that he might see some sign of relaxation in Deborah's back when he spoke, but for all the difference it made, he might as well have been silent.

Carr turned back and shook her head. "No. You come with us now, Captain, and make a statement, and maybe we'll sort something out about visitors later. But right now, we take her in."

As Angel was lifted from the bench, her eyes opened and she saw the uniforms of the two men carrying her. Gideon watched as her eyes filled with panic, and she started to struggle then to scream. Deborah lunged forward, and for a moment, he thought that she was going to attack the Security men. Gideon grabbed her arms and pulled her back, holding her tight against his chest, facing away from him. He felt her stiffen in his grasp, then relax slightly as he spoke to Carr over her shoulder.

"I'll come straight down, but I want my wife to be allowed to see Angel soon. She's Angel's next of kin. You can't keep them apart." He had to raise his voice over Angel's screams as the Security men carried her out of the church.

Carr stared at him, dumbfounded. "Your wife? You called us out to arrest your wife's sister?" She looked at Deborah more closely, then back at Gideon, seeming to take in their clothes for the first time. "How long have you been married?"

Gideon closed his eyes as he replied. "About half an hour."

Carr looked from his face to Deborah's and back. He couldn't see the expression on Deborah's face, but he could imagine how she looked. Carr laughed. "Congratulations, Captain. I think you may just have achieved a new Mars record for the shortest marriage ever." She turned and left the church, pulling the door shut behind her.

There was silence as Gideon held Deborah by the upper arms, looking towards John, Lily and Sarah as they all stood staring at him and Deborah. Gideon could see the horror and shock on their faces, still unable to believe what they'd just seen him do. He felt Deborah lift her shoulders, shaking her arms to loosen his hold. He let go, seeing the marks he'd left on her upper arms where he'd gripped her so tightly. One more thing for him to feel bad about. She turned to face him, the impassive mask she'd worn in front of Carr breaking down as she allowed her fury to take control. It hit him like a hammer, a wave of anger, hatred and despair, so strong that he grunted and took a step backwards.

"You bastard. I'll never forgive you for this." Deborah spat the words at him through gritted teeth, and the feelings that she sent with them left him in no doubt that she meant it.

Gideon never saw her move, but at the last moment he caught a glimpse of Deborah's fist hurtling toward his chin. He barely had time to turn his head, to take some of the impetus from the blow, before it landed, knocking him backwards. His head flew back with the force of the punch, slamming into the wall behind him.

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He slowly became aware of a fierce pain in the back of his head, a dull ache along his jaw and an almost overwhelming nausea that he fought to control. Gideon opened his eyes slowly, and saw the world spinning in front of him so closed them again quickly, fighting the urge to vomit. The pains in his head were appalling and if someone had offered to remove it for him, at that moment he'd have gladly accepted. Gradually his awareness of other parts of his body increased and he realized that he was sitting upright on the floor, his back against something hard. [A wall?]

He tried opening his eyes again, but, this time, stopped when they were no more than slits. Peering through his nearly closed eyelids, the face in front of him came into focus. Sarah. He realized that she'd been talking for some time, but the meaning of her words hadn't registered. Now they began to make sense.

"Can you hear me, Matt? Don't move. Just stay still. John will be back with my bag soon, and I can check your head. I don't want you to move until I can do that, OK?"

Gideon went to nod his agreement and found out why she'd told him not to move. He came close to throwing up all over them both, but somehow held himself back. Sarah spoke again, keeping her voice low, for which he was grateful.

"Do you remember what happened?" Sarah sounded concerned. Gideon opened his eyes a little wider and could see that he was right. She looked worried.

He remembered not to nod this time and managed to whisper. "She hit me. I think I'm now officially a battered husband." Sarah laughed, and he winced. "Don't. That's way too loud. Where is everyone?" He could see that they were alone in the church. "Where's Deborah?"

Sarah put her hand on his shoulder. "She ran straight out of here after she hit you. I don't think she even saw you bounce your head off the wall. That wasn't very smart, Matt. I think she loosened a few teeth with that right hook, but it was the wall that did the real damage. You have concussion, and I want to check for skull fractures before I try to move you."

Gideon swallowed and closed his eyes again. The pain in the back of his head was awful, but he was getting used to it and the nausea was settling into a constant state that he could control. He whispered, "Next time she hits me, I'll make sure I have a nice soft surface to fall on. Where did Lily and John go?"

He felt Sarah's hand on his face and her fingers around his eyes. "Open your eyes, Matt, I want to check your pupils." This time, he managed to get them fully open. He watched as her gaze shifted from one eye to the other. "Lily ran out after Demon and John followed her. He wanted to make sure they were both OK. He called a couple of minutes ago; they're all back at the hotel. He's on his way back with my bag, so I can check you out and we can decide whether we need to get you to Medbay."

Gideon shook his head then wished he hadn't. "No Medbay. I have to get down to the Security Station and make sure that they'll let Deborah see Angel. Sarah, will you call Luke and get him to see Deborah? If my jaw is anything to go by, she'll have hurt her hand when she hit me. Get him to look at it will you? And will you come down to the Station with me? I want to make sure that they're taking proper care of Angel." He watched as she nodded, then closed his eyes again. "Christ, what a mess. Remind me never to get married again, Sarah. I can do without days like this."

He heard Sarah's soft chuckle before she spoke. "We could all do with a little less excitement, Matt, but no promises on Medbay. If you've cracked that thick head of yours, then I want you horizontal for a while."

He kept his eyes shut but smiled. "Why doctor, I'm a married man. If you wanted me horizontal, you should have told me sooner." Gideon heard her laugh, and at the same moment, the sound of the door opening and footsteps quickly approaching. He opened his eyes to see Matheson standing above him, passing a bag to Sarah where she knelt next to him.

Matheson squatted by his side. "How's the head?"

Gideon managed a twisted smile. "It hurts. Want to swap?" He watched as Sarah took an instrument from her bag and started running it over his head. She lifted her hand to his neck and pulled gently, moving his head away from the wall so she could check the back. For a moment, the world spun, and

he thought he was going to lose his breakfast, but he fought it down again.

Sarah moved his head back gently, until it rested against the wall and smiled at him. "No cracks. You're lucky you didn't get a haircut; I think it was that thick hair of yours that cushioned the blow and saved your thick head. Now hold still, and I'll do something about the pain."

She started to play a different instrument along Gideon's jaw, and the dull ache there gradually diminished. Then she pulled his head forward again, and he could feel the gentle vibrations of the regenerator playing on the back of his head. The pain slowly went from agonizing, through disgusting and horrible, into just bearable and finally to very sore indeed. As the pain decreased, so did the nausea and within a few moments, he began to feel like something approaching human. [But approaching from a distance,] he thought as John and Sarah helped him to his feet. They supported him as he walked to a bench and lowered him. He sat catching his breath for a moment, then waved at them both to sit, saying, "It hurts to look up. Help me out here will you?"

When they'd sat either side of him, Gideon looked at John and asked, "Where is everyone? Is Deborah all right?"

Matheson nodded. "She's in your rooms with Marcus. She went straight back to the hotel and collected him from Alwyn, then disappeared downstairs. Lily and Luke went after her but she wouldn't let them in. She said she needed some time to herself, and we all know that she does that sometimes, so they left her alone. They're back in our rooms with the twins and Alwyn. Max, Ilas and Dureena took Vya back to the hotel, and said they would wait there for news. They're anxious to help if they can. I told them that I couldn't think of anything they could do right now, but they said to tell you that they're there if you need them." He leaned forward and looked round into Gideon's face. "I know that they're feeling pretty bad about all this, Matthew. They know that it's your promise to Dureena that made you turn Angel in. Much as they want the people responsible for the death of their child punished, none of them wanted you and Demon to pay this high a price for keeping that promise."

Gideon smiled bitterly. "That's the thing about promises, John. They're only worth something if you keep the hard ones as well as the easy ones. But if I'd known what this one was going to cost..." he trailed off, thinking. If he'd known that he could end up losing Deborah over this, would he have made that promise? Could he have lived with himself if he hadn't? Could he live with himself now, when the consequences of that promise were so appallingly apparent? Well, it was pointless thinking about it, he'd made his bed, and he'd better learn to lie in it. [Another cliché for Max to despise,] he thought to himself.

He pushed himself to his feet, pleased to find that he could stand unaided, albeit with a slight wobble as he let go of the back of the bench in front. "I have an appointment with Lieutenant Carr, and she's not renowned for her patience." Gideon turned to Matheson. "Will you come with us? Sarah's coming to make sure that Angel is being treated properly. If Angel will agree, and you're OK with it, I'd like you to scan her. That way, we can find out for sure if she knew what she was doing when she brought Lucas back. I know that telepathically obtained evidence isn't acceptable in court any more, but it's good enough for me and coming from you, it'll be good enough for Dureena. We can settle this once and for all and I'll get Carr to drop the charges."

Gideon knew that he was asking a lot. For Matheson to drop his mental barriers enough to make a scan was difficult, and the process itself was painful for him, but it was the only way Gideon could think of to be sure that Angel was innocent, as Deborah believed she was. If she were, he'd make damn sure that the charges he'd brought against her were dropped. He watched as Matheson thought about it and eventually nodded, saying, "But she has to give a full informed consent. We have to be certain

that she knows what she's agreeing to, or I can't do a thing."

Gideon nodded. "I know. Let's get down there and do it." He started toward the door then stopped dead as he saw a flash of color on the ground. The yellow rose he'd bought for Deborah lay on the ground just inside the door. It was flattened and broken where several feet had trodden on it as they left. He thought about retrieving it, then decided to leave it lie. It was such a perfect symbol of his marriage at that point that he couldn't bear to touch it. He kicked it aside and left the church.

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"You won't have to worry about Cultists shooting you this time Lieutenant, because I'm going to do it for them!" Gideon leaned across the table, glaring into the face of the short, plump Mars Security Officer. He knew that this wasn't the best way to get her co-operation, but his head was still throbbing and he'd lost his temper at her latest news. "You bring in a woman who's dehydrated, malnourished and obviously in need of immediate medical care, and you just toss her into a cell? You don't feed her, you don't give her water and you don't get her a doctor? What sort of people are you on this planet anyway?"

Carr leaned forward until her nose was a centimeter from his. At this close range, he could almost see the steam coming out of her nostrils as she replied. "What sort of people are we? I'll tell you what sort of people we are, Captain Gideon," she flung his name out like an insult. "We're poor people, that's what we are. Mars has never had a strong economy, and since the plague hit Earth, we've been on the brink of total collapse. We can barely afford to provide air, food and drink to people who can pay for it. We can't afford the luxuries that you take for granted. The prisoner will be given food and water when everyone else is. And forget the medical treatment. We can't afford it."

Gideon straightened, barely controlling himself. He spoke through gritted teeth. "I'll make arrangements to have food and water delivered for Angel, if you'll guarantee that it will be given to her directly." He had absolutely no idea how he was going to pay for the deliveries, but he'd deal with that later. Maybe Max would give him a loan. Carr nodded, and he continued. "As for medical treatment, there's a doctor here who's willing to treat Angel for nothing." He pointed at Sarah Chambers. "Free. Gratis. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Any of those words mean anything to you?"

Carr narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. "Two conditions. One, you bring your own medical supplies. We have nothing here. Two, your doctor looks at some other prisoners while she's here. I have others in a worse state than the girl you had us bring in. They need help that I can't give. Can you?"

Gideon was taken aback. It seemed that Carr didn't like what she had to do and say, but had no choice. She wanted to take care of the people in her custody, but didn't have the resources to do so. He turned and looked at Chambers, who'd been watching the confrontation. As he did so, he noticed that Matheson was speaking quietly into his commlink. He decided to leave that, John would tell him what it was about when he needed to know. "Are you OK with that, Sarah?"

Chambers nodded. "If there are people here in need of medical attention, then I'm happy to help, but I'll need some basic supplies, Matt. I can't do much with what I have in my bag."

Matheson stepped forward and interrupted. "I thought this might be a problem. I lived on Mars for long enough when I was in Psi Corps, to know how tough things are here. I got Luke to call the Excalibur when I went back to the hotel, and he asked Medbay to put together whatever Dr. Chambers was likely to need to treat Angel and get it on a shuttle. That was Trace on the commlink. He just landed and is on his way from the Space Port."



Gideon nodded his thanks and turned back to Carr. "That's both of your conditions met, and I've another proposal for you."

Carr stared up at him, as belligerent as ever. "I'd have thought you'd had enough proposals for one day Captain. Your last one didn't go too well did it?"

The Captain controlled his temper again. He needed her to agree to his offer. "If you get one of your people to make up a list of what medical supplies you need, I'll have them delivered from Medbay." Gideon watched as Carr's eyes lit up. "But there's a condition. In exchange for those supplies, you give my wife unlimited access to her sister. Do we have a deal?"

Carr's smile was admiring. "Nice move, Captain. You've got a deal. Blondie can come and go as she pleases, just tell her to keep out of my way."

The door was flung open, and Trace Miller was escorted in by one of Carr's henchmen. He handed Sarah the bag of supplies he was carrying and turned to Gideon. "Any other little chores for me, Captain?"

Gideon shook his head. "Enjoy yourself Trace, you're due shore leave anyway. Try not to get into any fights this time." He turned back to Carr as Trace left. "Can the doctor see Angel now? I need to talk to you about something else, but there's no reason why Sarah can't start treating her immediately."

Carr ordered the Security man to show Chambers to Angel's cell, then turned back to Gideon as they left. "So now what? You got another deal for me?"

Gideon nodded. "Of sorts. I'm sure that you'd like nothing more than for me to reduce the headcount of your cells by one. That'll ease the strain on your resources." He watched Carr's face as she looked suspiciously at him, wondering where he was going.

"I asked you to arrest Angel as an accessory to murder. The problem is that we're not sure whether she knew what she was doing at the time. If we can be sure that she didn't, then I won't press charges, I won't make a statement and you can let her go. You won't have to be responsible for her any more. I'll take her out of here. But you still get all the medical supplies."

Carr frowned at him. "And how do you plan to be sure? Isn't that what the court is for?"

Gideon pointed at Matheson. "If she agrees, then Lieutenant Matheson will scan her. Then we'll know once and for all if she was tricked into helping the real murderer, or was a willing accomplice. I know that Telepath evidence isn't good in a court of law, but it's good enough for me not to press charges. Can you live with that?"

Carr considered. "Well, she'll have to agree to the scan, but if she does then, hell, why not? I don't need the extra paperwork this case will give me, anyway. Let's do it." She spun on her heel and headed out of the door.

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When Carr showed Gideon and Matheson into the cell where Angel was being held, Gideon could see that Sarah had already got her hooked up to a drip. Chambers was in the process of trying to clean her up a little, using a cloth dampened from a bottle of water included with the medical supplies. As far

as he could see the only part of Angel's body that was completely clean was the area where the drip went into her arm. Sarah's attempts to clean her face seemed only to have redistributed the dirt rather than removed it. Another wave of guilt passed through him at the sight of the emaciated and bedraggled woman in the cell. [How the hell did this happen? Where's Nikarran? Why didn't he take care of her like he was supposed to?]

He could see that Angel was conscious, but apparently oblivious to her surroundings. She held a glass of water tightly in both hands, trying to sip from it, but her hands were shaking so much that the glass rattled against her teeth, until Sarah reached up to steady her. Then Angel caught sight of Gideon and Matheson standing in the doorway, and her eyes filled with panic and fear. Sarah barely caught the glass as Angel let go of it and started to scramble backwards on the bunk, until her back was pressed against the wall. She was whimpering incoherently while Sarah tried to calm her, trying to get her to take back the glass and drink more, but Angel shook her head as she stared at Gideon. Her words became audible.

"I'm sorry, Lucas. Don't hurt me. I couldn't help it, I had to do it. You would have hurt her, and I couldn't let you. Please forgive me. I love you, Lucas. I've missed you so much, please, don't punish me. I had to tell Gideon, I couldn't let you hurt my sister, please..." She trailed off into incomprehensible mumbles again.

Gideon was dumbstruck. If he understood her correctly, she thought he was Lucas [Again!] and was apologizing for betraying him. She must have been the 'Patron' behind the message he'd received telling him of Lucas' plan to kidnap Deborah. She'd betrayed her lover to save her sister and her sister's child. Given how Lucas had cowed and controlled her, Gideon had no idea where she'd found the strength or the courage to do that. But then, these sisters never ceased to amaze him in the strength of their commitment to each other and the lengths to which they'd go to support each other.

He approached her warily, listening to Sarah trying to calm her, explaining that it wasn't Lucas coming to get her but Gideon coming to help her. [Help her? Christ, Sarah, that's a sick joke. If you only knew...] He knelt by the side of the bunk and looked up at the terrified girl, sitting as far back as she could get, her arms holding her knees tightly, staring at him in fear. Gideon spoke as softly as he knew how.

"Angel, it's me, Matthew. I'm not going to hurt you, or punish you. Deborah is safe. You saved her, Angel. You stopped Lucas from hurting her. Do you understand me, Angel? Deborah and our son are both safe. I can't tell you how grateful I am for that." She seemed to understand what he was saying, so Gideon slowly reached out to touch Angel's bare arm, where it was held tightly round her knees. She flinched but let him touch her. "Why didn't you let me know it was you sending that message? Were you afraid that Lucas would find out?"

Angel nodded then whispered, "I didn't think you'd believe it, if you knew it came from me. I know that you hate me, and I deserve it. Everyone should hate me, I'm bad through and through. I killed Dureena's baby." Tears started to trickle down her face as she spoke.

Gideon took a sharp breath. That was the last thing he'd needed. She'd confessed what she'd done in front of Carr, who would now be obliged to give evidence if called. He wanted desperately to hold Angel, to comfort her, to wipe the tears from her face and do whatever he needed to protect her, but he had to have answers before he could do that.

"Angel, I don't hate you. I've never hated you, and no one deserves to be hated, least of all you. And your sisters love you, whatever happens, always remember that. You were very brave in saving

Deborah, and I need you to be brave again." He slowly moved his hand to her face and wiped her tears away with his fingers. Angel was frozen in place, letting him touch her, but with fear still showing in her eyes. Gideon went on, still speaking softly and carefully, almost as if to a child.

"We need to know what happened when you brought Lucas back. We know that Lucas stole the life of Dureena's child, but your sisters are sure that you didn't know he would do that. We need to be sure of that too, but we need your help to be sure."

He watched as Angel shook her head from side to side. "I didn't know! He told me that no one would be hurt this time. I did what he asked, but he didn't tell me. I would never have done it if I'd known, oh please, believe me I would never have done that! Not a baby, I wouldn't do that, I couldn't..." she trailed off again, her eyes becoming unfocussed as her misery grew.

Gideon stroked her arm gently, trying to calm her as Sarah sat next to her on the bunk, her arm around Angel's shoulders, hugging her and whispering reassurances. But Angel's distress mounted, and she rocked back and forth, mumbling more and more incoherently, her eyes blank.

Gideon turned to Matheson who stood in the doorway watching the whole scene in silence. "Can you do anything, John?"

Matheson shook his head. "I'm sorry, Captain. For a brief moment there, she was lucid, but everything is just a jumble now. I can't scan her without her consent, and she's in no fit state to give it. She's projecting panic and fear so strongly that even with my shields at full strength, she's getting through. There's nothing I can do."

Gideon closed his eyes and cursed inwardly. He'd run out of options. The only course now open to him was to fulfill his promise to Dureena. His last way out of that promise had been the possibility that John could telepathically confirm Angel's innocence. Dureena would have accepted that, but she'd never accept Angel's unsupported word. He stood and turned to Carr.

"OK, let's do what we have to. John and I can give you statements of what happened and the names of other witnesses you can call. The charge is accessory to murder."

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Gideon stood on the steps of the Security station, eyes closed, rubbing his forehead. His headache wouldn't let up and was making him feel nauseous again. Or was that feeling caused by what he'd just done? He and Matheson had given statements to a skeptical Carr about the events that had occurred on Eriadne nine months earlier, when Lucas had stolen the life of Dureena's child. They'd kept their statements short and factual, giving Max, Luke and Dureena's names as additional witnesses if required. Carr had shaken her head, telling them that this was the most bizarre crime she'd ever recorded, and if she hadn't heard Angel's confession, she may well have told them to forget it.

He felt John touch his arm gently. [Twice in one day, well maybe there's hope for a miracle yet. I'll damn well need one, if I'm going to get Deborah to listen to me.] He'd tried to call her repeatedly, both on the commlink he'd given her and through the hotel, but she wasn't answering.

Gideon turned and looked into Matheson's concerned face. "Are you all right, Matthew? Is your head still aching?"

He smiled painfully. "Nothing that a quick decapitation wouldn't cure." He breathed deeply, trying to

clear his mind and work out what he needed to do next. "John, I need a couple of favors. When you get back to the hotel, can you find Deborah and tell her that she can see Angel any time she wants? I'd come with you and try to tell her myself, but somehow I doubt if she'll listen to me right now. And can you let Dureena know what's happened? Tell her I kept my promise." Gideon closed his eyes for a moment, trying not to think what that promise might cost him. "I'm going back in to see if Sarah needs any more help. We've got medical staff sitting on their butts up on the Excalibur; they may as well make themselves useful down here if they can, and I'll get them to bring down supplies of food and water for Angel. And painkillers for me."

Matheson smiled then nodded his agreement. "Not a problem. And I'll start work on hiding the unauthorized use of supplies, so that Earthforce don't catch us on their next audit."

Gideon shook his head ruefully. "One of these days, I'm going to do something that even you can't get me out of, John. But thanks, I appreciate it. And thanks for your help and support today. It's just a shame that we couldn't have ended this whole fiasco right here."

Matheson looked at Gideon, his face full of concern. "Do you believe Angel and her sisters? Or do you think she knew what she was doing."

"Honestly John, I believe her. I think that she was ruthlessly manipulated by that bastard, who lied to her about what he was getting her to do. I don't think she had the faintest idea of the price that would have to be paid for bringing Lucas back, and I'll say that on the witness stand given half a chance. But somehow I doubt if that's going to be enough to satisfy Deborah."

Matheson frowned as he replied. "I'm sorry, Matthew. If I get chance I'll do whatever I can to make her understand. But we all know how stubborn Demon can be." He shook his head before continuing. "But I agree with you. I'm sure that Angel didn't know what she was doing. I just wish that I'd been able to confirm it with a scan, then neither of us would have to stand up in court. If I'm called, then I'll be saying the same as you. She didn't know."

Gideon watched as John left for the hotel. Giving his head one more rub, he turned and went back into the Security station.

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When John got to their suite at the hotel, Luke was sitting on the sofa with Lily, holding her hand in his while his other arm lay around her shoulder. As soon as he entered, Lily jumped up and ran up to him, with Luke following closely. John could see that Lily had been crying as her eyes were red-rimmed, and he smiled at her sadly, caressing her cheek as she looked up at him wide-eyed.

"How's Matthew?" Her eyes conveyed the unspoken question, *And how are you?* She knew how close he and Matthew were, and how worried John was for his Captain—as much as she was for Demon.

John sighed and drew his lovers into a tight embrace, drawing comfort from their presence and their love flowing into him as he dropped his shields completely and shared with them. [[He's managing, but just barely. I'm worried he has a concussion, but he won't let anyone treat him properly. He didn't say so, but I'm afraid he thinks it's a punishment for what he did.]] He took a deep breath. [[Matthew asked me to tell Demon that she can visit Angel anytime. Have you been able to talk to her yet, Lily?]]

Lily shook her head no. [[She's blocking.]]

John could clearly see the concern in her eyes. They all knew that the chances for Demon and Matthew getting back together again after Angel's arrest and being charged as an accessory to murder were pretty slim, if not practically non-existent. Would their love for each other be strong enough to heal the rift? And if not, would they be able to live without each other? They were all afraid of the answer to that question. John didn't even want to start thinking about the consequences that Matthew and Demon's separation would have on the relationships of her sisters... not yet.

John sighed and spoke aloud, "I'll go see Dureena. Matthew wants her to know he kept his promise." He almost choked on the last words.

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It was getting late, and they still hadn't heard from or seen Demon. Lily was starting to get worried, but tried not to show it too much. [She still has Marcus to care for; that will keep her going.] They'd been discussing what had happened over and over. Lily was still upset with Gideon for having Angel arrested--[How could he? And especially on this occasion!]-although intellectually, she understood why he'd done it. [And he's paying for it, but Demon is too!]

"What shall we do if they won't make up?" Luke suddenly asked, voicing the fear they'd all been harboring inside. He was sitting to Lily's right on one of the big sofas, while John sat to her left, both snuggled up against her.

Lily bit her lip and looked at her hands, which were holding John's and Luke's in her lap, then turned around to face Raven, her eyes enormous. She opened her mouth to say something but suddenly her eyes widened and her head whipped around to the door. She jumped up and ran towards it, calling, "Enter!"

When it opened, she found Demon standing outside, dressed in her usual black again, all her luggage and Marcus' cot standing beside her in the corridor, with the baby sleeping inside.

"Demon!" Lily threw herself into her arms, crying with relief.

"Ouch," Demon involuntarily exclaimed as her right hand got caught in the melee.

Lily let go of her, her eyes filling with concern as she saw how swollen Demon's hand was. "Oh dear, I'm sorry... Luke?" She turned to her men who were now standing halfway between the sofa and the sisters.

"No," Demon said, shaking her head adamantly. "It's OK."

Luke had walked up to them and frowned as he saw just how bad Demon's hand looked. "No, it's not OK, not at all. Let me treat it..."

"I said no." Demon glared at him, but quickly dropped her eyes. Instead, she looked at Lily and said, "I wanted to ask if I could move in with you, into the second bedroom? I've been trying to find a room at another hotel all day, one that wasn't so high up, but..."

Lily looked at her aghast, ignoring Demon's attempt at humor, querying her oldest sister through their link, then gasped and grabbed Demon's left hand. She was barely aware of John and Luke's shocked reaction as she looked back up at Demon, one word expressing all her grief and pain. "No!"

John drew Lily into a tight embrace from behind, trying to soothe her distress and her shaking as tears ran down her face. She felt Luke's hand on her shoulder and involuntarily grabbed it.

Demon quickly withdrew her hand, her cool mask almost slipping as she looked at her sister. "Lily, please, don't ask me to explain or tell you anything, not now. What I need right now is your help."

Lily closed her eyes and forced herself to take a few calming breaths, then turned around to face John and Luke, looking at them questioningly. Luke nodded, "Of course," and John gave her a soft smile. "Whatever seems right for you."

Lily squeezed their hands and gave them a weak smile. At least like this, they'd know where Demon was, and could try to reason with her. If it weren't for Demon, she'd have broken down and cried right then and there. But she had to be strong for her sister. Lily turned around to face Demon. "Make yourself at home."

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Demon was alone with Lily in the second bedroom. John and Luke had helped them carry Demon's belongings in and then retreated to the living room to grant the sisters some privacy, after John had given Demon Matthew's message.

"Do you need anything? Can I help with something?" Lily asked, standing in front of the bed, hands clutched, watching Demon as she bent over Marcus, sleeping in his cot. Demon was gently touching her son's blond curly hair.

Demon straightened and smiled at her softly. "Thank you, Lily, I'm fine." Lily just continued looking at her sister, and again Demon had to hold back tears. "OK, so I'm not, but..." she took a deep breath, and suddenly found herself hugging her tiny sister, who was literally shaking. She gently pried Lily's arms loose and pushed her back a bit. "Please don't, or I'll start crying too, and that just isn't an option, not now. I'll be visiting Angel soon, and I can't go there with red, puffy eyes."

Her sister's smile looked as weak and pasted on as hers felt. Demon watched as she sniffed and wiped her eyes. "OK. Call if you need anything?"

As Lily whirled around and ran out of the room, Demon sank down onto the bed, taking several slow, deep breaths, trying not to lose control over her emotions. She felt as if her life was falling apart, but she couldn't allow herself to fall apart with it. Every time she looked at her son, she couldn't help but see his father, in his eyes, in his mouth, in all the small things that reminded her of Matthew. She had no idea how she was going to live without Matthew, but at that moment she couldn't see how she could live with him after what he'd done. But the thought of trying to live without him made her feel weak, and right now, she had to go on being strong, for her sisters, for her son, but most of all for herself. She stood and with one last deep breath, left the temporary sanctuary Lily had given her.

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