

The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble - Part 4: Crossroads

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We are four, but we are one!

Chapter 3

Demon looked at her sisters. They had gathered in John and Lily's suite again, waiting for news. John held Lily tightly against his side, while Max had pulled Ilas onto his knee as they'd waited. Demon had paced the room, unable to settle until she knew that Matthew was safe. She'd accepted Matthew's arguments for why he should go instead of her. She knew that he needed to do that, to assuage his guilt for what he'd done to Angel, but the thought of losing him again, so soon after their reconciliation, was agony. Demon hadn't slept after he'd left her bed just before midnight, finally giving up the attempt and bringing Marcus to join John and Lily an hour before. The children were all sleeping soundly in the bedroom, while their parents waited for Gideon's call.

Demon watched as her sisters were hugged and kissed by their partners. For them, the main risk was now over. Their lovers were safely out of the Security Station and on their way home, but for Demon,

the worst was yet to come. Everything now depended on her. If she couldn't carry off what was needed in the next few hours, all the effort and risk Matthew and the others had taken would be for nothing, and she would lose her sister forever.

The tall blonde hid the anxiety she felt at this thought from her sisters, unwilling to let them see how afraid she was. Matthew was the only person Demon now allowed to see her doubts and fears, and she would have to leave before he came back. As she dropped her wrist after taking the call, she nodded at the others. "I'd better get moving. Wish me luck."

Carr was waiting for Demon on the steps on the Security Station, when she arrived at six on the dot. Demon didn't want to give the policewoman any excuse for not allowing her to see Angel. That would ruin everything. Carr glared at her as she arrived.

"You'd better be prepared for a strip search before you go in there. Even I can't get you past that, now that your sister is held for murder."

Demon nodded. "I'll do whatever is necessary. I'm sorry that you've been caught up in this and I'm sorry for what has been done to you, but your legal system could take my sister away from me forever. Can you try to understand why I'm willing to do almost anything to be with her while I can?" She allowed a small part of her fear to escape, letting Carr feel her projection.

Carr's eyes widened. "You're a telepath?"

Demon shook her head. "No, just an empath. I'm sorry, I try hard not to let my feelings impinge on others, but right now I'm more scared than I think I've ever been in my entire life." As with her previous statement, this was true, just not in the way Carr thought.

They entered the Security Station together and Demon endured the strip search, then passed her bag to Carr to be examined. The contents were tipped onto the table of the examination room, two bottles of water, bread, cheese, honey, fruit, chocolate and a few toiletries. Having examined them carefully, Carr swept them back into the bag and presented it to Demon.

Before they left the room, Carr stopped Demon with a hand on her arm. "You may not believe this, but I'm only doing my job."

Demon looked carefully at the small, dark officer and shook her head. "That's not true. You don't believe that Angel is guilty any more than I do. I can feel your doubts and suspect that you know who was really responsible for the murder. I don't know why you're pushing these charges against my sister when you know they're untrue, but I think that you just want this crime cleared off the books. I hope you can live with yourself, if they find her guilty." She pushed all her anger deep inside herself, and only allowed her genuine sorrow to escape her.

Carr glared at Demon again, obviously uncomfortable with being caught in a lie. She jerked her head towards the door. "Follow me, blondie. You can stay with your sister until the trial this evening."

They walked in silence through the corridors of the Security Station, until they reached the door to Angel's cell. By this time Demon was exercising more control than she'd ever done in her life, to prevent Carr from detecting her anxiety. As the door swung open, Demon plastered a fake smile on her face and rushed in. "Angel darling! I'm here, they've let me come to see you again." She did everything she could

to project happiness into her voice and mannerisms.

Angel lay on her bunk unmoving, the blanket tucked up round her neck, facing the wall. She didn't move or respond to the people entering her cell, so Demon stepped forward and spoke again. "Angel? Angel, wake up, darling. I've brought you some breakfast."

Demon moved forward and placed her hand on Angel's shoulder, aware of Carr watching her every move. She tugged gently and Angel rolled onto her back. Angel's face was bluish white, her eyes closed and she didn't breathe. It wasn't difficult for Demon to let out a gasp of shock as she saw her sister's face. For one awful moment, she wondered whether a terrible mistake had been made, and Angel was really dead. The shock and fear Demon felt at that moment were genuine, and she had no difficulty in projecting them full force at Carr, who was still standing in the doorway.

She heard the policewoman gasp in pain as the sending hit her, then Demon swooped to pull her sister into her arms. At that moment, Demon let go of all the pent up fear, grief, anxiety, anger and guilt that she'd been holding back since Matthew had returned to her. Their reconciliation had eased much of her despair, but the underlying feelings hadn't gone away. Now Demon let them take control, and she projected them full force, as she held her sister's lifeless body in her arms, and screamed her grief and pain.

Carr staggered backwards out of the cell, gasping for breath under the assault on her senses that Demon was projecting. She watched in horror as the tall blonde held the prisoner in her arms, rocking her, screaming her name over and over, while letting loose an appalling barrage of grief and despair.

Carr knew that she should try to get Demon away from her sister. She should try to check that Angel was really dead, but the constant waves of anguish coming out of the cell were almost physically preventing her from entering. She finally gritted her teeth and rushed back in, grabbed Angel's wrist where it dangled off the bunk, and tried to find a pulse. Carr could find nothing, and the wrist was stone cold and blue. Rigor might not have set in, but Angel was clearly dead.

The Security Officer began to panic, well aware that her feelings were being influenced by the grieving empath who lay crying in front of her, but unable to control those feelings. Carr knew that she had to get out of there, if she wanted to think coherently and figure out what to do next. She almost ran from the cell and slammed the door behind her. It didn't stop the projections but it blunted them a little. At least, she could now think straight.

As Carr leaned back against the door, she became aware of noises from the other cells along the corridor. Demon's projections were affecting all the inmates to varying degrees, and screams and cries were now coming from every cell. Carr knew that she had to get Demon out of there, before she had the whole Station sliding into a bottomless pit of despair. But who could stop her?

"Gideon. You brought these fucking women into this place, you can take them out."

Gideon paced the floor of his hotel suite in his robe, waiting for the call that he prayed would come. The plan depended on Deborah keeping up a projection of grief and despair so strong that no one could approach her. They hoped this would drive Carr to call him, and he would go down to the Station with Luke. He prayed that they didn't just shoot his wife to stop her projecting, but he kept telling

himself that even Carr would never dare do that to the wife of a Galactic Hero. Too much bad press would result.

He'd hoped that he could get back to the hotel before Deborah left for the Security Station, just so he could see her, albeit briefly, but the delay in Angel's cell had meant that he hadn't returned until after she'd had to leave. So he'd met up with the others, thanked his team, then gone back to his room with Luke, who now sat on the sofa, demonstrating a hell of a lot more patience than Gideon was able to muster. He'd carefully undressed, put on his robe and messed his hair, in preparation for Carr's call.

The comm. unit beeped, and Gideon had to stop himself lunging at it. As far as Carr was concerned, he should be fast asleep, oblivious to what was happening in her Station. He counted to ten, then took the call, yawning as he did so. "What is it? Do you know what time it is?" He pretended to focus on Carr for the first time and allowed his face to show some anxiety. "Lieutenant? What is it? Is Deborah all right?" Logically, this would be his first question.

Carr shook her head. "No she's not. I took her to her sister's cell, and we found Angel dead. Before I ..."

Gideon interrupted her. "Dead? Angel's dead? How in hell did that happen?"

Carr shook her head. "I don't know. Your wife is in there screaming her head off, projecting her grief and pain so strongly, that I can't get into the cell to find out! I need you to get down here and get her out of there, so we can find out what the hell happened."

Gideon nodded vehemently. "I'm on my way." He started to lean forward to cut off the call, then stopped. "Do you have a doctor to check on the cause of death?"

Carr shook her head. "You know damned well I don't. If we can't afford a doctor to look after the living, how in hell am I supposed to find the credits for the dead?"

Gideon nodded and took a deep breath. "I'll bring my ship's doctor with me. He may be able to sedate Deborah, and he can check on what happened to Angel, while he's there. But I warn you now, Carr. If we find that Angel died because of your neglect, I'm going to raise a row that you'll never hear the end of. Off." He turned to Luke and grinned. "Let's go."

Gideon held Deborah tightly against his chest, as Luke examined Angel's body using a hand held scanner. Carr had been waiting for them when they'd arrived and rushed them straight through to the cellblock. It had been total bedlam in there, with screams of despair and grief coming from every cell, as Deborah's projections had crashed down on them all. Gideon had gritted his teeth, thinking that this was nearly as bad as the state he'd found her in two days before. No wonder none of the Security guards would go in with them. He had to admire Carr's guts for being willing to go back in there.

They'd found Deborah holding Angel close to her, no longer screaming but rocking her sister gently, whispering to her to please wake up. They'd watched as Deborah had stroked Angel's hair, kissing her forehead, the tears streaming down her face as she'd begged her sister to speak to her. Even knowing that it was all an act, Gideon had felt a lump in his throat at the sight. He was certain that Carr would be fooled.

Gideon had run across the cell and sat on the bunk next to Deborah, pulling her into his arms, gradually persuading her to let go of Angel, so Luke could look at her. Deborah's eyes had slowly

focused on him, then she'd buried her head in his shoulder and sobbed, the waves of grief still crashing over them all, but gradually diminishing as he held her and kissed her.

Luke looked up from where he was examining Angel and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Captain. She's been dead for at least a couple of hours, there's nothing I can do."

Gideon nodded and asked, "What caused it, Luke? What killed her?" He was very much aware of Carr standing in the doorway of the cell, watching them all.

Luke stood up and gently moved Angel's body until it lay flat, with her arms resting across her chest. He looked sorrowfully down at her, before turning to Gideon to answer. "Massive brain hemorrhage. I won't know the cause of it until I do an autopsy, but she wouldn't have felt anything. It looks like it hit her in her sleep. She just didn't wake up." He sighed sadly.

Gideon looked over at Carr. "Can we take her body back to the Excalibur for autopsy? We can let you have full details of the findings for your files. Then we can take her home for burial."

Carr nodded. "Fine. I can't afford an autopsy anyway, and I don't need another body to dispose of. Just get them both out of here."

Gideon stood slowly, pulling Deborah up with him. She had stopped sobbing, but ripples of loss and pain still washed over them all.

"Dr. Raven will stay here with Angel, until I can get a shuttle down to take her up to the ship. I'll take Deborah back to our hotel. We'd planned to stay there until tomorrow, after the trial, but frankly there seems little point in us staying on Mars any longer. I'm taking my family back up to the Excalibur, but we'll be in orbit for another day, so if you need us, you know where to find us." He steered Deborah out of the cell, holding her tightly.

Demon stood at the foot of the shuttle ramp in the landing bay, holding Marcus in her arms, feeling the warmth and security of Matthew's arm around her, as they watched the stretcher carrying Angel being brought out. Luke stayed close to the stretcher, while Lily and John followed closely, carrying Faylinn and Dasha. She knew that another shuttle, carrying Max, Ilas, Dureena and Vya, was due to dock as soon as they cleared the landing bay and depressurized.

Looking at Angel's body, completely covered with a sheet, Demon had to keep reminding herself that her sister wasn't really dead, that the plan had worked and she was now safe. Demon knew that she should be happy. She was Matthew's wife, they had a beautiful son and she had her sister back at last.

But the events of the past few days had nearly overwhelmed her, and Demon felt exhausted by the emotions that she'd allowed to rage through her in the Security Station. Letting go of all those negative feelings had been cathartic, but had left her drained, and there was still unfinished business to be dealt with.

Luke would take Angel to Medbay, revive her and keep her there until they had left Mars orbit. Then later she could be given a new identity, staying with them on board the Excalibur.

But how would Matthew explain Angel? What would Angel do? She still had the charge of murder on

her record on Mars, although now she was officially dead, no one would ever come looking for her. Thinking of those charges made Demon think of her friend again. Nikarran was dead. Nothing could change that, or her sense of responsibility for it. Her first task on returning to her quarters would be to compose a message to Nikarran's daughter, telling her what had happened. Demon didn't know where she was going to find the courage or the words for that message, but it was a duty she knew she must perform.

She had seen Galen briefly before they left, and he had reaffirmed his commitment to stay behind after they left Mars, but he planned to join them that evening. Galen had said that he wanted to speak to Angel, but had refused to say about what. Demon knew that she would have to persuade her sister to listen. Angel had told her how much she hated Galen, and what he had done on Eriadne. Convincing Angel that the role Galen had played in her rescue at least deserved a hearing would be difficult. Even more so, as Demon knew that Angel would be furious with them all for kidnapping her in this way.

Her thoughts shifted to the call Matthew had made just before they left Mars, for what she hoped would be the last time. Demon never wanted to set foot on the planet again in her life. Matthew had called Magnusson and told him of the death of her sister. This was an essential part of the deception. Magnusson must believe that Angel was dead. Demon had watched, from outside the range of the comm. unit, as Magnusson's eyes had flared with anger. Although she was unable to sense his feelings, she had known that the anger was mixed with lust. She'd locked her face into an impassive stare to conceal her contempt and disgust for the man who had failed to clear her sister's name, and who had tried to take her away from Matthew. Demon didn't want Matthew to know what she was feeling or why. She couldn't allow him to see how she felt, until Magnusson had played the final part she needed, clearing Angel's name and avenging Nikarran.

Demon sighed deeply at the thought of all the things that needed to be done and wondered where she would find the energy to do them. Then she felt Matthew's arm tighten around her waist, and she looked around at him. He was smiling gently at her, the smile that weakened her knees and raised her temperature. Kissing her gently, Matthew whispered, "I know there's a lot we still have to do, but it's going to be OK. Angel is free, you have her back safely with you, and most of all, we're back together. As long as we have each other, we can do anything."

Demon's eyes filled with tears as she whispered back the only words she could think of. "I love you."

Gideon sat back from his desk, having finished reading the last of the reports that had awaited him on his return to the Excalibur. He stretched to ease muscles that had locked during the hours that he and Matheson had spent in his office, and checked the time. 16:00. They had been in there reading for over four hours, Gideon going through the reports on the crew placements, while John went over details of supplies. John finally put down his datapad and sighed, then stretched in the same way Gideon had a few moments before.

Gideon smiled. "You were right. Jackson was a good choice as Second Officer. She's done a damned good job of covering things, while we were away."

He watched as Matheson tried to hide a flush of pleasure at the compliment and the praise for his protégé.

"She's good. Not afraid to make decisions, but sensible in referring things upwards when she has to. She's not a great risk taker like some I could mention," a small smile played across Matheson's lips as

he paused, making Gideon snort with laughter, "but she's a safe pair of hands."

Matheson looked over at his commanding officer and continued, "Talking of hands, how is it?"

Gideon held up his right hand and shook it. "Sore. Luke said there might be a couple of fractures, and I think he was right. Those regenerators are handy little things, but it still takes time for broken bones to heal." He shrugged. "Nothing to be done about it, I guess. I'll just have to be more careful where I hit people in future." Gideon grinned across at his XO. "The problem is that Deborah's in exactly the same state as I am. We only have two good left hands between us, and neither of us is the slightest bit ambidextrous. It makes changing diapers a bit of a challenge."

Matheson narrowed his eyes. "I'd just like to remind you, Captain, that changing your son's diapers does not fall within the remit of an Executive Officer's duties. Nor does it fall within the duties required of a Captain's sister-in-law. So if you were thinking of trying to delegate..."

Gideon held up his sore hand, grinning in surrender. "The thought would never have crossed my mind, Lieutenant," he lied, fluently.

John laughed in disbelief and leaned across to lift the data pad that Gideon had been studying. "Has Jackson managed to get everybody allocated to suitable quarters? Given the number of different species we have on board, getting everybody quartered with acceptable neighbors is going to be fun."

Gideon nodded as Matheson studied the pad. "She's done a damned good job. Although I suspect that you may have had something to do with the fact that Angel is about as far away from Deborah and me as she could be."

John looked across the desk at Gideon and smiled ruefully. "Yes, that was my idea. You two seem to have the ability to... Well, you seem to annoy each other at times."

Gideon snorted his amusement at that comment. "That's the understatement of the century! We irritate the hell out of each other. I've never met anyone who can make me lose my temper as quickly or as thoroughly as Angel does."

Matheson leaned forward, his face for once clearly showing his concern. "How are we going to explain her being on board? We can't carry passengers, and she doesn't have a role on the crew."

Gideon shook his head. "I don't know. I'm still trying to think of a..." he stopped as the door buzzer sounded. "Enter."

Luke Raven walked into the room, immediately dropping his bag and slumping into a chair. Gideon raised his eyebrows at such behavior. Luke was normally punctilious about the courtesies due in the military hierarchy, and it was usual to wait for the Captain's permission before taking a seat in his office.

Raven looked at the other two men and smiled. "Sorry to interrupt, but I had to get out of Medbay, and as I needed to see you anyway, Captain, I thought I'd take refuge here."

Gideon smiled. "You look like you need a drink, but the best I can offer is coffee, or the nearest thing we have to it anyway." He poured three cups, slightly awkwardly as he was using his left hand, and pushed two across the desk to Raven and Matheson. "So what has you running away from Medbay?"

"Women." Raven said the one word, then lifted his cup and took a deep drink. The other two men waited for him to continue. "Demon, Lily and Ilas all insisted on being there when I revived Angel, and they brought all the babies with them. When Angel was conscious enough to realize where she was, she went berserk. She could barely sit up in bed, but that didn't stop her cursing her sisters blind for bringing her up here and depriving her of the chance to prove her innocence."

He turned to Gideon and smiled maliciously. "She wasn't very happy with me either, and if I were you, Captain, I'd steer well clear of her for a bit. She was threatening to do things to certain parts of your anatomy that... Well, it didn't make pretty listening for any of the males nearby."

Gideon laughed. "Deborah will protect me. She rather likes those bits of my anatomy."

Raven snorted his amusement and continued. "I could see that Demon was building up a head of steam, and Lily wasn't looking best pleased either. They let Angel rant for about ten minutes, then Demon let rip. She called Angel every name under the sun..." He paused and looked across at Gideon. "She has quite an extensive vocabulary, doesn't she?"

Gideon nodded silently, and Raven resumed his tale. "Anyway, Demon got so angry that some of it must have leaked through her link to Marcus, because he started to cry. That set Faylinn, Dasha and Vya off, so then Lily and Ilas got mad, too. I left them to it, when it had developed into a four-way yelling match, with four screaming children adding to the noise. I hope to God that they all calm down soon, or none of our lives will be worth living!"

The three men looked at each other in silence. Gideon poured them all refills, before he spoke. "Anyone for a hand of poker in the mess hall tonight? Looks like none of us should go back to our quarters for a while and I can smuggle something stronger than coffee in there. Maybe we should invite Max along, and we can all hide out together."

Matheson laughed. "What about Dureena? If we're hiding from witches, shouldn't we ask her, too?"

Gideon shook his head in amazement at his XO's innocence. "You want to gamble with Dureena? Forget it, John, she knows more ways to cheat than I do!"

He chose to ignore Luke's murmured, "Surely that's not possible," then Raven raised his voice and carried on. "Speaking of hands reminds me of my excuse for coming here to hide. I need to check yours, Captain."

Gideon held out his right hand, while Raven ran a scanner over it. "It's healing nicely, but you have two fractured metacarpals, and the lower phalanges on your ring and middle fingers are cracked. I want to immobilize your hand for the next twenty-four hours, to ensure that all those bones heal correctly. I didn't have the right equipment with me on Mars but..." He bent down to reach for the medical bag he'd dropped by the side of his chair on arrival, and pulled out what looked like a black glove. He handed it across to Gideon, saying, "Put it on."

Gideon grimaced slightly as he pulled the glove on over his sore hand, then let out a yelp of surprise as Raven reached over and touched a gray spot on the back. The glove felt as if it had inflated and stiffened around his hand. It looked the same as it had before, but now the Captain couldn't move his hand or fingers.

He looked up at Raven quizzically. "What the hell is this thing?"

Luke laughed at the expression on Gideon's face. "It's a new material that goes rigid when the appropriate electrical field is applied. Keep it on for the next twenty-four hours. It will stop you putting undue pressure on any of the weakened areas and allow the hand to heal properly."

Gideon stared down at his hand, then up at Raven, frowning. "Tell me, how I'm supposed to work with this thing on? I have to sign requisitions and reports. How the hell do I do that, when I can't move my hand?"

Raven grinned. "Delegate. That's what you have an Exec for, isn't it? To stand in for you when necessary."

Gideon glared at his ship's doctor. "Well, there's one thing I'm not going to delegate, so perhaps you can tell me how I'm supposed to make love to my new wife with my hand like this?"

Raven's grin widened. "You're a talented man, Captain. I'm sure that's something you can do with one hand behind your back." Before Gideon could speak, he went on. "And that glove is the latest fashion for the Gideon family anyway. Your wife is wearing one exactly the same. I guess you'll have to hope that anything she normally does with her right hand, she can do equally well with some other part of her anatomy."

Gideon glowered across the desk at the other two men. John was rocking with helpless laughter by this time, and Raven had a grin plastered across his face that a Cheshire cat would have been proud of. "Very funny. Well, if either of us does the other an injury, remember who'll have to fix it. Wherever it is." His own grin nearly matched Raven's.

The door buzzer sounded again and Gideon raised his voice to call, "Open!" above the sound of the other two men's laughter. When he saw who stood outside he called out, "Max! Come on in. We're hiding out from the sisters and wondered if you'd care to join us? Poker in the deck 14 mess hall tonight? Men only, and I'm bringing the beer. The doctor's bringing pretzels, and if he can't find any in ship's stores, we'll send him out to get some, but I may not give him a shuttle or a space suit." He gave Raven his most evil grin.

Max dragged another chair up and sat down, leaning his elbows on the desk and looking serious. "Much as I'd love to accept that invitation, we may all be otherwise occupied this evening."

Gideon straightened in his chair. The expression on Max's face was somber and he looked like he needed to talk. He was about to ask John and Luke to give them some privacy, when Max spoke again.

"I'm glad you're all here. It saves me having to go through this more than once." He took a deep breath then said quickly. "Ilas, Dureena and I are leaving."

Max was well aware of the other three men's stunned expressions and their eyes boring into him. "I'm sorry, Captain. We didn't take this decision lightly, or easily. There are two reasons, really." He looked straight into Gideon's eyes. "First, the obvious one--Galen. Dureena and I discussed this after you asked us to try and work with him again, but I'm afraid we can't. Not yet. Maybe in a few years, when..." His voice trailed off, and he tried to suppress the pain of the memories of the death of their unborn child. Finally, he continued, "Second, the not so obvious but more important one. If not for this, we might have suppressed our... reservations... about *him*." He took a deep breath. "It's Ilas."

Gideon raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Ilas? Is something wrong with her?" he asked, looking from Eilerson to Raven, who looked just as surprised as he responded.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Max hurried to reassure them. "No, no, she's fine, physically. It's just..." he sighed. "You know that she doesn't have any memories prior to being brought together with her 'sisters', but she's always wanted to know where she came from, who she was. Well, now that our son has been born, and she's been able to leave Eriadne, that desire has grown. I know which planet her species comes from, and a long time ago, I promised her that we'd go there someday, to try and find clues as to who she is and why her people died. Unfortunately, that won't be possible if we're hopping around the galaxy on board the Excalibur." Gideon was watching him silently, intently, as were Matheson and Raven, waiting for him to continue. "I've been offered a contract with IPX that will give me a ship and enable me to set my own schedule. It will give us the necessary freedom and time to investigate Ilas' past."

For a moment, there was silence, as the other men tried to digest the news. Then Raven asked quietly, "And what about the link? You know that the sisters can't live far from each other. It will be painful, even dangerous for all of them if Ilas..."

Max nodded. "I know." He worked his jaw. "Much as we hate it, whether we actually can leave or not depends on," he spat out the last word, "Galen."

Gideon was truly stunned by the sudden announcement. [Stunned? Baffled! Floored! Fill in the blanks!] There hadn't been any indication that Max, Dureena and Ilas planned to leave, at least not at this point, before their new mission had even begun. Part of him felt disappointed, betrayed even. Dureena Nafeel and Max Eilerson had belonged to the Excalibur family from the beginning, and had told him they wanted to stay, to at least try and work with Galen again. But another part of him understood all too well--had he been in Max's position, wouldn't he have done the same, if his partner were desperate to find clues about her past? The fact that Eilerson and Dureena were willing to ask Galen for help spoke volumes about how much they loved the little shape-shifter.

Gideon sighed as Max finished explaining how Ilas thought the Technomage could probably help release her from the link. It may still be painful for all the sisters, but not as painful as when Angel had been cut off from them so suddenly. Gideon suppressed the guilt and anger that threatened to rise, as he thought about his wife's half-sister. Angel was safe now, and somehow, he would find a way to get along with her. He had to, not only for Deborah's sake, but for Angel's too. She had gone through enough.

He sighed and spoke, looking at Eilerson. "I'd love to be able to offer you something as strong as you gave me--hell, I could use a good shot of that stuff myself--but coffee will have to do." He poured Max a cup and pushed it in his direction with his left hand. As Max accepted it and took a sip, Gideon looked at the other two men, who looked as stricken by the news as he felt.

"Do the sisters know?" John finally asked, his worry about Lily's reaction as obvious as Luke's.

Max looked up from the depths of his cup. "Ilas wanted to tell them herself."

After another moment of silence, Gideon leaned forward on the table, looking into Max's eyes. "I won't

try to stop you or change your mind Max, I know it's no use, but if you and your family ever decide that you'd like to hop around the galaxy with us again, you know who to call." He gave Max a lopsided grin. "I never thought the day would come when I'd say 'I'll miss you', Mr. Eilerson," Max snorted, but Gideon continued, "I surely never was as close to saying it as I am today, but to spare us both the embarrassment of acting in a civilized manner around each other, I won't." The Captain's grin turned mischievous as he lifted his cup in salute, and the linguist chuckled as he returned the gesture.

"Why, thank you for your considerate behavior, Captain. I'd hate to ruin my bad reputation, and yours, but I have to admit that I'll miss sparring with you." He paused long enough to take a long, slow pull at his coffee. "Especially as I always won."

Gideon laughed. "In your dreams, Max, but be careful what you wish for. We may drop by your neck of space from time to time. Just so Ilas can see her sisters, of course."

"Of course." Max inclined his head, then continued, "I'll give you the names of a couple of people who, between them, can marginally compensate for my absence. Of course, to fully make up for my loss, you'd need a dozen or more, and even then, they wouldn't have my talents." Gideon snorted as Max raised his cup. "To successful missions, gentlemen."

"Successful missions," the other three men agreed solemnly as they clinked their cups.

Angel's sisters were sitting on her bed in Medbay, Demon on one side, Ilas on the other, and Lily at the foot of the bed. Angel was propped up against the raised back and a heap of pillows, taking turns in holding her nephews and niece. At the moment, she was rocking the dozing Vya in her arms, while Marcus was contentedly babbling against Demon's shoulder, Faylinn slept in Ilas' lap, and Dasha was still feeding on Lily's breast as she sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed.

At some point during their shouting match, they'd stopped shouting at each other and fallen into each other's arms, sobbing with the relief and joy of being back together again. Angel still didn't agree with them about her abduction, but knew that it was pointless to argue now. She'd been eager to see the babies, and demanded that they let her hold them as soon as she was strong enough. While she did, her three sisters had caught her up on what had happened during the last few months, and she'd told them bits of her life on Mars. They were all stricken to hear how she'd had to live, but Ilas had grinned and said, "I'm sure Dureena would love to complete your thief's education. Maybe she'd stop bugging *me* then."

Angel had lowered her eyes, but before her guilt about what she'd unknowingly done to the tiny Zanderi could overwhelm her again, Ilas had leaned forward and touched her hand. "She knows that Lucas tricked you, Angel, and Max does too. Lucas never told you that someone would have to die," her voice strained at the words, "because he knew that you'd never have agreed to bring him back if you'd known." She squeezed Angel's hand, until blue eyes looked into lavender.

"Really?" Angel whispered, pouring all her fears and hopes into that one word.

Ilas nodded and smiled gently. "Yes, they do, and they asked me to tell you that while they won't be able to forget, they'll try to understand and forgive. But it will take time."

Angel nodded and sniffled, close to tears, then whispered again, "Thank you."

Ilas let go of her hand and hugged her with one arm, still holding Faylinn with the other. "We're sisters, silly." She let go of Angel and sat back, her wide grin spreading to the other's faces.

"If only we could link with you as we used to, then you'd know without a doubt how much we love you, and always will," Lily added, smiling sadly. When she saw Ilas bite her lip and look away, she frowned and asked softly, "What is it Ilas?" She watched as Ilas took a deep breath and sighed, then turned back to face them.

"I may just as well tell you now."

"Tell us what?" Demon asked, allowing her concern to show on her face and in her voice, since they were alone.

Ilas just looked at her for several seconds, biting her lip again, then said softly, "Well, there may be a way to bring Angel back into the link," she lowered her eyes and whispered, "if you let me go."

After a moment of stunned silence, she was overwhelmed with vocal and mental questions. Finally she shrieked, "Stop it!" She knew that if they kept up the barrage, then Demon would start sending at any second, and the whole ship would be affected.

Their voices ground to a halt as Demon, Angel and Lily just stared at her in shocked amazement, then Lily leaned forward to touch her hand and said softly, "Tell us Ilas. Tell us why you want to leave our link."

Ilas could hear surprise, pain and sadness in her red-haired sister's voice and looked at her wide-eyed. "Oh, I don't want to, really, but..." She stopped, trying to get her thoughts in order. She'd rehearsed what she wanted to say, but now that the moment had come, her mind was in turmoil. [Start at the beginning, Ilas!]

Lily continued to hold Ilas' hand as she listened to her younger sister's explanations. They all knew that Ilas had wanted to find out who she was and where she came from since they'd first been joined together. They also knew that Max Eilerson had told her about a dig on a planet which had once been inhabited by a species looking like her--her real form, golden skin and red cat's eyes. A species of chameleons, able to change their skin color at will. Ever since he'd told Ilas, the idea of going to that planet with him and Dureena had been gnawing at her.

After Vya's birth, and especially since they'd left Eriadne, it had become almost unbearably strong. The secrets of her past were out there, finally within her reach, and yet so far away. She knew that if they stayed on the Excalibur, traveling along the rim and into unknown regions, the chance of visiting the planet of her origins was almost non-existent, but she'd been willing to wait for the sake of Max and Dureena. Then Galen had come back, and Gideon had asked them to try and work with him again--the man who'd helped Lucas Buck escape after he'd killed Dureena's unborn baby. The man who'd held Buck's hiding place a secret for reasons only he and Gideon knew.

Ilas, Max and Dureena had discussed this at length many times. The previous night they'd agreed that they'd try for Ilas' sake, knowing that it wasn't possible for her to live far away from her sisters due to their link, but Ilas hadn't been willing to accept such a sacrifice from them. That had been when she'd suddenly known how to solve the dilemma.

"I really don't want to leave you. You're my sisters, my family, and you will always be. But..." Tears were shimmering in her eyes as Ilas looked around. "I need to know. Can you understand that? Can you forgive me for being so selfish?" She was crying now.

Lily squeezed her hand, barely aware that her cheeks were wet, too. "I may have lost part of my memory when the Vorlons changed me, but you have nothing at all. It's not selfish to want to know about your past, Ilas. You want to give your son a sense of who he is and where he comes from, that's only natural. You said it yourself a few minutes ago--we are sisters, and we will always be, no matter what happens, but you have your own family now, as do we." She smiled through the tears that were obscuring her view. "We can be proud of you, Ilas. Our baby sister has grown up and is making her own decisions. She's her own woman now."

With a loud sob, Ilas turned around as only a shape-shifter could and threw her free arm around Lily, hugging her tightly, clinging to her as she buried her head in her shoulder and sobbed loudly. Lily's arm came around her, and suddenly there were more arms, and two more heads leaned against theirs. Somehow, they managed to not crush the babies between them.

Angel mumbled, "Just when I thought I had my sisters back, you have to go on your quest." She gave a short laugh to show she wasn't angry, then started crying too.

Suddenly, Demon's muffled voice could be heard, "Stop it you three, before I lose control and the whole damned ship drowns in tears!"

They were all laughing and crying at the same time as they slowly disentangled and tried to compose themselves again. Their babies had surprisingly not picked up on their mothers' mood. Dasha had even fallen asleep sometime in the last few minutes, and Lily carefully laid him down in the natural cradle formed by her crossed legs, then alternated between wiping away her tears and adjusting her dress.

When they had calmed somewhat, Demon said, "Lily is right, you have to make your own decisions now, Ilas. We already noticed that our link with each other is slowly getting weaker as our links with our children grow, but for now it's still too strong to allow us to be at a great distance, and we all know how painful it was when one of us was cut off." She smiled softly at Angel, who squeezed her hand and smiled back bravely, then Demon turned back to face Ilas. "So how do you think it will be possible to release you, and bring Angel back in? Did one of you find a spell that would achieve it?"

Ilas shook her head. "No. None of us did." She frowned in concentration, trying to find the words to explain--it would have been much easier to send, but she had to speak out loud for Angel's sake. "You see," she finally said, "Angel is outside the link now, while I need to be released. What if we can transfer it from me to her? It would probably be painful for me, but for you three, it shouldn't be that bad."

Her sisters looked at each other in amazement, then back at her. Demon studied her face, then said, "Assuming that's possible, and I think it might be--we still don't know how to do it."

Ilas shifted her shoulders, bracing herself for the storm that would probably be raised by her next words. "You're right, we don't, but a Technomage might."

When John and Luke got back to their quarters early that evening, Lily was standing over the twin's

cots, watching them sleep, obviously very distraught.

"Ilas?" Luke asked, putting his arm around her shoulder and kissing the top of her head.

Lily sighed. "That too. Or rather, that's part of it."

John, who had his arm around her waist as he stood behind her on her other side, softly kissed her shoulder and said, "So give us the full picture. What's bothering you?"

Lily remained silent for several seconds, trying to sort out the jumble of her thoughts, then asked, "Do you know what a hand-fasting is?"

John said slowly, "Isn't that kind of a temporary marriage?"

Lily nodded. "That's the usual definition, but you can set the timeframe from the usual year and a day until eternity."

Luke raised his eyebrows at John appreciatively, and the young Asian grinned, "Read that up in a book about paganism a while back." He turned serious again, as he cocked his head to one side to look at Lily and ran the fingers of his right hand along her cheekbone. "So what does this have to do with Ilas?"

Lily chewed her lips. "She's leaving, now that Angel has only just returned, and none of us knows when or if we'll all be together again." She paused, then turned around and guided them to stand before her so she could look at both men, keeping hold of their hands. "You know that I'm not too keen on marriage, but I do want to spend the rest of my life with you both and with our children. A hand fasting to me means that you let the world know that you are committed to each other, but respect that people can change, feelings can change. I've been thinking about this for a while now, but I wanted to have all my sisters here for the ritual."

She gave them a sheepish grin. "That's why I never mentioned it, but now that we've found Angel again, I thought that maybe sometime after we'd all settled in..." She trailed off, closing her eyes and letting go of their hands to hug herself as the pain of losing another sister welled up inside her. She felt Luke put his finger under her chin and gently prod, until she looked up at him.

"You thought we could hold our hand-fasting with all your sisters there?" Luke's voice was thick with emotion, and the look in his eyes was so intense that all she could manage in answer was a nod.

John lifted her left hand to his lips and kissed it, whispering, "Then let's hold it while they're still here."

Luke nodded in unspoken agreement, smiling softly.

Lily looked up at them wide-eyed. "Are you sure? I don't want you to agree to this just because of me."

The two men exchanged a glance, then she could feel John join their minds as he smiled warmly at her. *[[There is nothing we would love to do more than let the world know how much we love each other and that Sad Eyes, Fire-Lily and Sweet Face belong together, however long they're meant to be.]]*

Lily almost drowned in the sea of love in which she suddenly found herself engulfed, as waves of it poured over her from both men. She opened her heart wide, not keeping anything from them as she cried tears of joy.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

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