

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

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Lieutenant Carr would like to get rid of Gideon and his entourage rather sooner than later.

Chapter 2

Gideon looked around at the team assembled in John, Luke and Lily's suite. The three of them sat on one sofa, while Max, Ilas and Dureena sat opposite. Deborah stood next to him, back straight, head up, face frozen into the impassive mask she wore when she didn't allow herself to feel or react. He knew that this was her response to the sight of Galen, who stood at the far end of the low table that was placed between the two sofas, the hood of his black coat up over his head, staff in hand. Gideon wondered if the length of the table was enough to prevent Galen and Deborah from starting a minor war. He could only hope.

Taking a deep breath, Gideon told his friends what Magnusson had told him and Deborah the night before. As he'd expected, Ilas and Lily were on their feet protesting before he'd finished, and Galen's face had set into a thunderous glower. Deborah spoke quietly from his side, but with sufficient force to interrupt her sisters.

"Stop. Let Matthew finish." Lily and Ilas subsided on the sofas. Gideon wondered briefly where she'd learned that tone. Earthforce spent years training its officers in that command voice.

"I've spent most of the night trying to think of a way around this..."

Gideon ignored the murmured comment and snigger from Max, "And I thought that the bags under your eyes came from being 'up' all night," and continued.

"And the only solution I can think of is to get her out of there."

He turned as John raised his hand and nodded for him to speak. "When you say 'get her out' I assume you mean illicitly? Illegally? As in a jail break?" John raised an eyebrow as he spoke, looking amused.

Gideon smiled at his XO. "You do know me too well. That's exactly what I mean. If we can't get Angel acquitted, then we'll just make damned sure that she isn't around to suffer the consequences."

There was a stunned silence around the room for a few moments, then all hell broke loose.

"OK, that's enough talk. Let's summarize where we've got to. The team going in to get Angel will consist of me, Galen, Dureena and Luke. That puts only one person from each family at risk. Whatever happens, we make sure that at least one parent is still around to look after the children." Gideon looked at Deborah, knowing that she was still unhappy about him putting his freedom on the line. She wanted to do that herself, but he'd convinced her that if someone had to risk getting locked up, then it should be him. There were things that she could do for Marcus that he couldn't, and she'd eventually accepted his argument, but that didn't mean she was happy about it. For himself, he felt he owed Angel at least that much.

Gideon had also turned down John's offer of help for two reasons. One was that he needed Luke's skills, and he didn't want both of Lily's men put at risk. The second was that John's next interview with Mr. or Ms. Jones was due in the next couple of months. They couldn't risk the telepathic interrogator finding out that John had been involved in a jailbreak.

They'd debated whether Ilas' shape-shifting skills would be more useful to them than Dureena's abilities and concluded that Ilas should also stay out of it. Vya was too young to lose his mother, and Dureena's lock picking expertise would be more useful to the team anyway. Ilas had accepted this grudgingly, but Gideon suspected that Max was going to have an uncomfortable few hours trying to improve her mood. Gideon struggled to keep a straight face at that thought.

"Right, we have a plan. Given what Luke's told us about the effectiveness of the drugs, we can't implement it until late tonight. So Galen, Dureena, Luke, we meet here at midnight. Any questions?" There was no response. "OK, see you at midnight, enjoy your day until then."

As the meeting broke up, Demon moved towards where Galen stood alone, staring out of the window onto the concourse below. "May I speak with you for a moment?" Galen turned to face her and nodded. "In private?"

He gestured, and the room suddenly went silent. Demon turned to look at the others, still talking by the door, but the sound of their voices had completely disappeared. She could see Matthew looking over at her and Galen, his eyes narrowed. She smiled to herself. [He's probably expecting me to throw a punch any minute now,] then turned her back to the others.

She forced herself to smile at Galen, although part of her wanted to vomit at the thought of what she

now had to do. "That's very clever, but I suggest that we both look out of the window as we talk. It wouldn't surprise me if Matthew can lip-read. He's probably learned it to help with his poker games."

Galen turned until they stood side by side, but in a quick glance at his face, Demon saw him smile. "You're quite right. That would be typical of Matthew. Now, why do you want to speak to me?"

Demon took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on the view of Mars dome, being careful to look out, not down. "I need a favor. Well, the favor is more for Angel than for me. I hope that you'll help her, even though I know of no reason why you should help me."

Galen half turned to look at her, frowning, then looked back at the view. "Why do you say that? If I can help you in some way, I will. We may not always have seen eye to eye, but you have never harmed me. I wish I could say the same. Matthew has told me how badly you were hurt, when I helped Lucas take Angel away. Please believe that I never intended to cause you pain. If I could have avoided helping him, I would have. Matthew knows and has accepted my reasons for doing that. I cannot share those reasons with you, and I know of no reason why you should believe me," Galen half smiled as he echoed her words, "but perhaps you can allow Matthew's acceptance to influence you."

He took a deep breath and continued. "Dureena once asked me if I had ever apologized for anything I'd done. I told her that I had done so only once, but I am doing so again. I am sorry for the pain that I caused you and your sisters. If there is anything that I can do to compensate for that pain, then please tell me. I will do whatever I can."

Demon was taken aback. She hadn't expected an apology, but she was reassured by the Technomage's words. Galen did seem to genuinely regret the pain he'd caused. She felt her hatred of him mellowing slightly. The sight of him still made her feel sick, but perhaps she would get over that in time.

She continued to look out of the window as she spoke softly. "The plan we've come up with for Angel's escape is all very well. It will prevent the authorities mind wiping her for something she didn't do, but it will also leave her with the charges still on record against her. She will have to use a new identity, never able to be herself again, always worried that someone will recognize her and discover the deception. I don't want my sister to have to live like that, as a fugitive."

Demon raised her hand to stop Galen before he could speak. "I know that in the time we have available, this is the only solution, but that doesn't mean that we have to stop looking for the real murderers. Nikarran was my friend. I can't stand the thought of the people who murdered him walking free, while my sister has to hide for the rest of her life." Demon's throat was tightening as she spoke, but she forced back her grief at the loss of her friend. "The Excalibur has to leave Mars in two days time, so I won't get the opportunity to pursue this. But you don't have to leave with us. I know this is asking a lot, but could you stay behind?"

Galen half turned toward her again, looking puzzled. "Why? What do you want me to do?"

"Magnusson knows who the real murderers are, but he won't do anything to pursue them once we leave. I don't know what deal Matthew did with him originally, neither of them will tell me, but I do know that the only reason Magnusson has continued with the case, beyond the point when the original charges were dropped, is his interest in me." Demon now had to suppress her anger at the lawyer. "He's done everything he can to keep Matthew and me apart. He tried to get me to pursue an annulment of our marriage, and when that failed, he's kept reminding me that it was Matthew who had Angel arrested, Matthew who is to blame for the position Angel is now in. I don't need to be reminded of that, I'm hardly likely to forget it. But I love Matthew so much, I could forgive him almost

anything he really regretted, as he does this. I don't need a lecherous lawyer trying to keep me away from the man I married." Demon was now breathing heavily, working hard at containing the anger that threatened to break loose.

Galen turned to face her, his face like thunder. "Are you sure of that?"

Demon looked at him and smiled bitterly. "I'm an empath, Galen, I know exactly what Magnusson feels, even if I can't tell what he thinks. Now look back out of the window, please. Matthew is watching us." She could see from the corner of her eye that Max, Ilas and Dureena had left, while Luke and Lily had gone into one of the bedrooms, no doubt to check on the children. John and Matthew stood on the other side of the living room, both with arms crossed, both staring at her and Galen as they talked. She turned her back on them.

Galen's voice was full of fury as he said, "Did Magnusson ever touch you? Did he try...?"

Demon shook her head and interrupted. "He wasn't that stupid. After the first time I met him, I always wore a knife and made damned sure he knew about it. I don't care about that anyway. What I do care about is clearing Angel's name. He has the information we need to do that. Can you stay behind and work with him to achieve that? I'm sure you could...motivate him appropriately. Matthew told me what you did to Lieutenant Carr." Her mouth quirked into a half smile, and she looked at Galen as he laughed.

"Oh, it will be my pleasure entirely, it's no favor at all. To get the opportunity to help Angel and to have a little revenge on someone who tried to harm my friend... I think it's you doing me the favor. I don't usually bear grudges, but in the case of Mr. Magnusson, I think I might be prepared to make an exception." Galen turned and held out his hand. "I know that you and I may never be friends, but I think it would mean a lot to Matthew if we could at least behave civilly toward each other. I'm willing to try, if you are."

Demon hesitated a moment. She still didn't trust Galen, but what Matthew wanted would always be important and she knew that he would want this. She took Galen's hand and shook it firmly. "Agreed. The next time I threaten to kill you, I'll be more polite about it."

Galen smiled broadly and released her hand. "Now, I think I should lower the sound barrier I put in place, before Matthew curls up and dies of curiosity. He's been watching us like a cat watching a mouse hole. I think he's expecting that only one of us will walk away from this encounter. Shall we surprise him?"

Demon smiled back as Galen gestured and turned to look at Matthew. She walked over to him and he uncrossed his arms to put them around her. "What was that all about?"

She raised her mouth to be kissed and when he had done so, gave him a small smile. "Private. None of your business, nosy." She kissed his nose, then leaned back. "So what do you want to do now? We'd better retrieve Marcus, before he forgets who we are. Lily has been very kind looking after him for so long, but I don't want to presume any further. Let's go play with our son until visiting time at the Security Station."

As they walked into the bedroom, Demon thought, [And I can only pray that you'll be here to play with him again tomorrow, not locked up in a cell somewhere.]

In the next twenty-four hours, Demon would either get her sister back or lose both her and the man she

loved.

It was early evening when Gideon decided that the time was right to call Carr. He moved to the comm. unit in the hotel room, watched by Deborah and Galen, who had joined them for dinner. Gideon was still trying to figure out what had been said between the two of them earlier that day, but decided that as it seemed to have produced a truce, he should just be grateful for the result, even if he didn't know the reasons.

Galen had made one of his mysterious gestures at the comm unit, then stepped back, telling Gideon that the call would find Carr wherever she was, and that she would be unable to cut Gideon off until he chose to let her.

The screen cleared to show Carr in what was obviously her home. She was dressed more casually than usual, but Gideon was amused to see that she was wearing thick gloves. Twenty-four hours of a Technocurse was obviously having an effect.

He gave her his most charming smile. "Good evening, Lieutenant. Are you well? Nothing too *shocking* happening today, I trust?"

Carr's eyes narrowed. "How the hell did you get this number? This is a personal line, and you have no right to intrude on my privacy." She leaned forward and tried to disconnect the call.

Gideon nodded. "You're absolutely correct, no right at all. Tough. And there's no point in trying to cut me off, this call will end when I want it to." He watched as she bridled, and her next move was predictable. She turned and headed for the door, obviously intending to leave the room.

Gideon turned and nodded at Galen, who made another gesture. Turning back, he was just in time to watch Carr walk smack into the door that had failed to open in front of her. Gideon grinned and raised his voice. "Ouch! That must have hurt! That must make your nose nearly as sore as your butt. And I'm willing to bet that your butt--or something very close to it--is pretty damned sore by now."

Carr wheeled round and glared at him, rubbing her reddening nose as she returned to the comm. unit. "You! I might have known it was you. Call that damn Technomage off, Gideon, or your sister-in-law will suffer!"

Gideon dropped the smile. "Try that and you may find out what a Technomage can do when he's *really* pissed off, not just playing around. I have another deal for you, Carr. Do you want to deal?"

Carr just glared back at him.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'. Now for the last twenty-four hours, I suspect that your life has been pretty miserable. It can go on like that, it can get worse, or the misery can stop, it's entirely up to you. If, for example, the problems you've been suffering were caused by a Technocurse--and this of course is entirely hypothetical--then that curse might, I repeat *might*, be lifted if you co-operate. Shall I continue?"

Carr glowered at him, but nodded. Gideon smiled again. He was willing to give good odds that she had received more than enough shocks to her body that day, particularly to some very sensitive areas. She was ready to deal.

He continued. "I might ask my 'pet' Technomage, as you call him, to do something about this terrible curse--the source of which is, of course, a complete mystery to me--in exchange for allowing my wife full access to her sister again."

Carr exploded. Gideon waited while she screamed and cursed at him, made another attempt to leave the room, then returned to the comm. unit to scream some more. She finally ran down with, "You evil, blackmailing, twisted, double dealing sonofabitch, I'll get you for this one day!"

Gideon nodded. "Absolutely, all of the above. Now do we have a deal?"

Slowly, reluctantly, and after Galen had increased the voltage of the charge she got every time she even tried to touch any object in her rooms, Carr finally agreed to the terms Gideon had set. They agreed that Deborah would meet her at the Security Station at six the following morning and be allowed to take Angel breakfast, then stay with her sister for the rest of the day, until the full trial the following evening.

Before Gideon ended the call, he left Carr with one final thought. "A piece of advice, Lieutenant. Never piss off someone who has a Technomage for a friend. What you've suffered today was mild compared to what could have happened. Think of every way in which technology could let you down, then remind yourself how lucky you were. And Lieutenant, please be nice to my wife and her sister tomorrow, we wouldn't want her telling me that you'd gone back on our deal again, would we?" He watched as Carr glowered at him one last time, then leaned forward and cut the signal.

Gideon turned to where Galen and Deborah watched him and nodded. "OK, Phase one is complete. Phase two starts at midnight."

Dureena looked at the group she had to work with and sighed. The idea of trying to break *into* a Security Station was bad enough. She had plenty of experience in breaking *out* of them, but this was a whole new ball game. Doing so with a doctor who as far as she could tell had never broken a law in his entire life, a Technomage who she didn't trust and still wanted to kill, and a Starship Captain who... What the hell could she say about Gideon? The last time they'd carried out a jailbreak together, he'd nearly got himself beaten to a pulp with his novel way of attracting attention, but the data crystal he'd taken with him on that occasion had proven useful. Maybe she should suggest that he take a copy on this mission. She was damned sure that he hadn't left the only one on Praxis 9. Gideon would never have kept only one copy of something that useful.

The thief took a deep breath and drew their attention to the hand-drawn maps on the table in front of them. They'd assembled in John's suite at midnight as Gideon had instructed, and she now needed to take them through her plans. She'd worked with John and Max earlier in the day, using false access codes to carry out a detailed study of the tunnels running under Mars Dome. Rather than risk leaving a trail of their activities, Dureena had drawn copies of the sections of the plans that interested her, and she now shared these with the team.

"OK, pay attention. We have one hour for this briefing, and then we go. Any questions, get them out of the way now, I don't want any unnecessary talk once we start. Yes, Galen, I know that you'll be shielding us from sight and hearing, but let's keep the risks as low as possible." She stood with her hands on her hips and glared down at the others as they sat either side of the table. Dureena was well aware of the amused smile on Gideon's face and turned to give him an especially fierce look.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled more broadly, bringing his hand up to his head in his snappiest Earthforce salute. "Yes ma'am."

Dureena growled at him and continued her briefing.

"Matthew, if you kneel on my coat one more time, I'm going to turn you into one of the rats that infest these tunnels. With your personality, you'd fit right in." Galen hissed over his shoulder at Gideon who crawled behind him, bringing up the rear.

Gideon glared at Galen and hissed back, "Then crawl faster. What's the matter? Does being on your hands and knees offend your Technomage sense of dignity? Not a position you've had much practice at?"

Gideon was well aware that he shouldn't respond to Galen's irritation, but the confinement, the near total darkness and most of all, the smells, were getting to him. He knew that these things were getting to them all, with the notable exception of Dureena. She had taken them into this hole with a degree of relish showing that she at least was a natural born tunnel rat. The thief squirmed her way through the warren with a facility that threatened to leave her team behind, and she had to keep stopping to wait for the men behind her. [Well, it helps that she's only two thirds the size of the rest of us!]

Raven was doing surprisingly well at keeping up in his position immediately behind her. His slim frame made sliding through the narrow tunnel easier, and he displayed an agility that impressed Gideon.

The same could not be said of Galen. He had refused to leave his staff behind, telling them it was essential to the shield of invisibility, with which he planned to conceal them at the far end. The combination of his staff, his long coat and the less than flexible leather pants he wore, made him clumsy and awkward in the confined space. He also complained more or less continuously about the smell.

Gideon wasn't exactly enthusiastic about the smell either, but as there was nothing anyone could do about it, he saw little point in complaining about it. He was as fed up with the sight of Galen's backside in front of him as Galen was with him kneeling on his coat. [If he'd move at a reasonable pace, then I wouldn't do it anyway!] Gideon wasn't sure whether he'd muttered that thought aloud, but suspected he had when Galen turned to glare at him again. In doing so, the Technomage managed to kneel on his own coat and fell flat on his face. It was unfortunate that there was a puddle of something unpleasant just where Galen's face landed. Gideon bit his lip, but had a nasty feeling that his snigger had been audible.

With Galen flat on his stomach, he could now see beyond him to where Luke had stopped to look over his shoulder. Gideon could see that Luke was having a hard time not laughing, too. Then Dureena's voice hissed back from beyond Luke. "If you idiots don't stop fooling around, I'm leaving you down here!" Gideon thought she just might.

Galen pulled himself back onto his knees with as much dignity as a Mage with a dirty face could muster, and continued to crawl. Gideon followed, making sure that he kept well back. Then Galen stopped suddenly, and Gideon didn't. The resulting collision between Gideon's head and the Technomage's butt sent Galen sprawling again.

"Sorry! Do you think that you could install brake lights on your ass the next time we do this?" Gideon rubbed his head. Galen's butt was less well padded than it appeared. [The bastard probably reinforced his pants before he came down here.]

Then he saw Galen's face and decided that he'd better stop the wisecracks. It was quite possible that a Technomage's look *could* kill, and Gideon realized that his life expectancy could be very limited if he didn't shut up.

Dureena's whisper carried back to him. "OK, we're here. Move forward until Galen is directly under the access point. Then do your stuff, Galen."

Gideon sat back on his heels and watched as the others moved forward. He could just see when Galen lifted his staff until it made contact with the manhole cover above his head. A tiny point on the cover began to glow brightly, while Galen closed his eyes and concentrated. Before they'd set out, he'd explained that he could burn a small hole in the cover and put a probe through, giving him a wide enough field of vision to ensure that no one was in sight when they emerged.

After a few moments, Galen opened his eyes and said, "All clear," pushing his staff upwards. The cover popped open under the pressure and swung back on its hinges. Galen stood and pulled himself up through the hole. Gideon gestured to Luke to follow, then Dureena, bringing up the rear himself.

When Gideon emerged, he found Galen and Raven stretching and rubbing at various points on their bodies that had become sore during their crawl, while Dureena had moved to the door and opened it a crack. Gideon looked around the room, stretching his neck and back as he did so, and wrinkling his nose in disgust. The room they'd entered was a communal bathroom. The Security guards lived in quarters attached to the Station, and the plans they'd looked at indicated that this single bathroom was used by the twenty plus resident guards. It stank.

Several vibe showers stood with doors open. While the insides of the shower stalls were clean, the outsides were filthy. The toilets were truly disgusting. The lack of water on Mars made so-called 'frictionless' toilets mandatory in all public buildings, but they didn't work that well. Over the course of years, deposits built up that made them unusable, and they had to be replaced. These were long overdue for replacement. Nothing had brought home the poverty of Mars quite as much as this awful room.

Both Galen and Raven had their hands clamped over their noses and mouths as they stretched, and Gideon soon followed their example. A rather nasal version of Galen's voice emerged, saying, "I think the tunnels smelled better."

Dureena looked round from the door and hissed at him. "Quiet! Let that be a lesson to you, Galen. Everything's relative."

If Gideon hadn't been working so hard at keeping his dinner down, he'd have laughed.

Raven followed Dureena down the corridor that led from the bathroom to the security door separating the guards' quarters from the cell area, staying tucked in behind her, with Galen behind him and Gideon bringing up the rear. Galen had them shielded, so that no one could see or hear them. It was a strange sensation as the shield shimmered just at the edge of visibility and, if touched accidentally, would distort the images coming through it.

A guard stepped out of a doorway just ahead of them, and they stopped dead. Although invisible and inaudible, if the guard collided with one of them, she'd soon know they were there. The inaudibility was a good thing as Gideon had been looking backwards, checking the rear, when they came to a halt. He collided with Galen again, causing yet another outbreak of Technomage cursing. They'd all discovered during the last couple of hours that Galen's range of swear words covered many languages and dialects. Perhaps if Max had been with them, he could have translated, but for the moment the others got the general gist. Galen was not happy.

Gideon gave him another weak smile and a whispered, "Sorry," as they watched the guard walk away, then they started to move forward again.

They were almost at the security door, when another side door opened, and a guard came barreling out so fast that it was impossible to avoid a collision. He barged straight into Dureena, knocking her flying and catapulting her out of Galen's shield into full visibility. The guard stood staring down at her, as she was sprawled on the floor, but before Raven could react, he felt a breeze pass him, and saw Gideon's fist connect with the guard's ear, felling him instantly.

The next few moments were a mad scramble as they pulled Dureena back into the shielded zone, dragged the guard into the bedroom from which he'd emerged, all the while accompanied by Gideon's quiet cursing. He was holding his right hand carefully in his left, and Raven could almost watch it swelling.

Pushing the door closed, Raven turned to Gideon. "Let me see that."

Gideon shook his head. "No time, we'll fix it later."

Dureena intervened. "Captain, we need everyone able to help themselves. We can't afford passengers at this stage. Let the doctor fix it, if he can."

Gideon gave her another weak smile and said, "Yes ma'am," then turned to Luke. "You heard her, Doc. Fix me up." He held out his hand for Raven's attention.

Luke had brought a regenerator in the small rucksack he carried slung over his shoulder and he ran it quickly over Gideon's injured hand. The swelling stopped, and then started to subside, and the bruising receded, but Raven knew there were broken bones that would take longer to heal. When he'd done everything he could, he looked up at Gideon. "That's about as good as it will get for a while. Next time you hit someone on the head, use a blunt instrument. In any contest between the single thick bone of the skull and the numerous small bones of the hand, it's pretty obvious which is going to suffer most."

Gideon grinned back at Raven. "Thanks for the advice, Doc. Next time I need to take someone down fast, I'll go looking for a club first." The tone was sarcastic, but the grin took the sting from the words.

While Raven was treating Gideon, Galen and Dureena had trussed up the guard using ropes that Dureena produced from about her person. Luke wondered briefly where she'd kept them, given that her outfit was skintight as usual. He shrugged and told himself that there was no point in questioning the little thief, as she'd never tell him her trade secrets. To be certain the guard didn't raise the alarm too soon, Raven injected him with a mild sedative he carried in the rucksack. Then he turned to the Captain. "What do we do now? We can't leave him like this, or they'll know someone was here."

Gideon nodded. "I know. We need to untie him. If you use the regenerator to fix the bump on his head

and give him another dose of sedative, what will he remember when he wakes up?"

Raven thought about it and smiled. "I've got a tranquilizer with me that will make all this seem like a dream. I can dose him with that, and whatever he does remember will be very vague. Will that do?"

Gideon smiled and nodded. "Do it." Raven measured a dose of the tranquilizer, while Galen and Dureena removed the bonds. After he'd given the hypo and used the regenerator, he turned to Gideon and nodded.

Gideon smiled his thanks. "OK. Now if anyone finds him, they'll think he just overslept." He checked the clock by the guard's bedside. "It's gone three, let's move."

They left the guard's bedroom in a tight group and arrived at the security door.

Dureena watched closely as Galen sent a tiny holodemon under the security door to keep lookout on the other side, then when he announced the all clear, she went to work. The locks wouldn't have been a challenge if she could have just forced them, but they didn't want to leave any trace of their having been in the Security Station, so she had to pick them carefully. That took time, and although they still had a couple of hours before the guards took breakfast to the inmates, they had no idea how often the guards patrolled, so wanted to get in and out as fast as possible. But hurrying led to mistakes that didn't help.

Slowly but surely, Dureena picked both the physical and electronic locks that held the door in place, until only the two heavy bars securing it top and bottom remained. She started to pull on the low one, while Gideon reached up with his good hand to pull back the high one. Galen stayed focused on the image he could see from his holodemon on the far side of the door, while the doctor watched their backs.

Once the bars were slid back, Dureena turned to Galen. He nodded, and she pulled back on the door then waited for her team to slip through, pulling it closed behind them. They had debated whether one of them should stay to take care of anyone coming through the door, but had decided that the risk of leaving someone behind was greater than the risk of leaving the door unlocked. Galen left his holodemon to alert them if someone approached the door, and that was the best they could do. Dureena wondered whether she should reset a couple of the locks, but decided that it would be better to leave their escape route clear. She wasn't happy about leaving the door unguarded, [I don't care what Galen says about his holodemons, I hate relying on one of those things,] but could see no alternative.

She sighed and waited for Gideon to take the lead. The Captain was the only one who'd been inside the Security Station before and knew where Angel's cell was, assuming that she hadn't been moved. Another unknown they had to take a chance on. Dureena shuddered at the thought of having to search the entire Station to find the cell in which Angel was held.

As she followed Gideon, just for a moment, the thief wondered what the hell she was doing there. They were trying to rescue the woman who deep down Dureena still held partially responsible for the death of her baby. She'd listened to everything Ilas and her sisters had said, and agreed that Angel had been manipulated into doing something, the consequences of which she hadn't understood, but she'd done it anyway. Angel's desperation to bring back the evil bastard who'd shot John Matheson, and who'd tried to confine Gideon's soul in oblivion, was so great that she hadn't considered the consequences. A part of Dureena still hated Angel for that. She wasn't sure that she could ever really forgive the witch.

But even Angel didn't deserve to be mind-wiped for a crime she hadn't committed, and Dureena was sure Angel would never have killed Nikarran. In the months she'd spent on Eriadne after the loss of her baby, Dureena had got to know the Guard Captain reasonably well. They'd hunted together and shown each other new weapons and ways of fighting. She'd liked the Brakiri, and was angry at the senselessness of his death. Where was the honor in being killed by a bunch of Terran rednecks? Nikarran had deserved better than that. Dureena just hoped that in the struggle to get Angel free, no one lost sight of the need to avenge Nikarran's death. She wasn't quite sure who should suffer or how it should be done, but one day someone would pay for the murder of the Brakiri, that she swore.

Her musings hadn't distracted her as they moved silently down the corridors, pausing at each corner, with Gideon now in the lead, Dureena acting as rearguard and Galen still maintaining the shield. When they finally arrived at the cell, she and Gideon switched places again. The Captain took up position as look out, while the thief went to work on the door. Again, the locks would have been easy to break, but they had to be left intact. Even so, it was only a few moments before Dureena had the door unlocked. She straightened and nodded to Gideon, who pushed the door open slowly. As they'd agreed, he and Raven went in, while she and Galen stayed outside on guard, standing either side of the door.

Dureena had no need and no particular desire to see Angel, and she wished she could avoid Galen too. But he was a necessary evil, and she did the only thing she could at this time to show her feelings. She turned her back on him, keeping watch on her side of the corridor.

Angel lay on her bunk, thinking back over her life and how she'd ended up in the cell. Since her return from the courtroom, she'd found a new inner strength, something that had always been there, but that she'd lost sight of. It was the strength that had enabled her to cope with her father's desertion when she was young, that had got her through her mother's illnesses and eventual death, that had kept her standing, head held high, by her mother's grave, knowing that she was alone in the world. But Angel hadn't been alone; Demon had appeared like a guardian angel, [well, she looks like one, even if her name's all wrong,] and taken her sister away to a new life. It was Angel's inner strength that had supported her through the hard days of learning to cope with her new life, the new school, new home, new sister, all of which had been so strange.

It was that strength that helped Angel cope with the guilt she'd felt after she and Demon had fought over David. Angel shook her head at the memory of that fight, wondering how she could have been so stupid as to believe David, when he told her that he'd never loved Demon, that he only loved her. She'd known how Demon felt about him, but had let herself be seduced by the handsome, older man. Somehow, Angel and her sister had found the strength to move past that awful time and learned to love each other again.

Angel's inner strength had been tested to the limit when they'd been abducted and experimented on by the Vorlon. It would have been so easy to give in, to follow their orders, and wreak the havoc and destruction the aliens had commanded. But Demon had led them in rebellion, and Angel had stood proud and strong by her sister then, refusing to obey the Vorlons' orders, no matter how painful the punishments. And she had used that strength to save herself and her sisters from rape, when the Brakiri found them. So where had that strength gone in the last year?

Somehow, Lucas had sapped her strength, making her weak, taking away her will, making her almost his slave, but Angel hadn't lost it completely. She was proud that she'd found her strength again, to defy Lucas when he was going to hurt her sister. That was the one thing she would never

allow, no one would *ever* harm Demon if Angel could prevent it.

Her appalling experiences on Mars had threatened to destroy Angel's will and grind her down forever, but she'd caught herself just in time. For all her anger with Gideon, she couldn't help but be grateful that he'd arrived and brought her sisters with him just in time to save her. Angel was sure that in a few more weeks she would have lost herself to misery and despair.

Now, Angel had a cause to fight for. She was innocent of the charges that had been brought against her, and she was determined to prove that innocence. She had said as much to Magnusson when he saw her immediately after the hearing, and had said the same to Gideon and Demon when they'd visited her that afternoon.

Unlike their former visits, this had taken place in a large public room, with several small tables set in a row. Each had a single chair on one side and two on the other. While Angel was being escorted there, she'd been told that she must sit back in the chair and must not attempt to touch her visitors, or the visit would be terminated immediately. It was obvious that Demon had been told the same, as when she and Gideon entered, Demon hadn't tried to hug or touch her sister, something that she would always have done if she could.

They'd talked quietly for an hour, Gideon saying little, just assuring Angel that they were doing everything they could to get the ridiculous charges dropped. He'd seemed distant and remote, and Angel had wondered whether he was still angry with her. Her sister's husband had so much to be angry about, why should he forgive her for the things she'd done, when she couldn't forgive herself?

The hour had flown past, and Angel was taken back to her cell. The food she'd been given since returning from the courtroom had been inferior both in quality and quantity to that she'd received before. The only water she'd been given was for drinking, and there was barely enough of that. Angel wondered why they had suddenly started treating her so badly, but decided that as she could do nothing, she would just have to live with it. Even the poor standard of what she'd received that day had been better than what she'd had on the streets.

Angel rolled onto her side on the bunk, placing her back to the wall, and wondered what time it was. The lights in the cell had dimmed some hours before, so she knew it must be night, but she didn't have any accurate idea of the time. She guessed it must be in the early hours and smiled sadly, "The darkest hour is that before the dawn." She closed her eyes then heard the door open. Her eyes opened then widened in shock, as Gideon and Luke Raven slid in, closing the door behind them.

Angel got up off the bed as Gideon and Luke approached her. "What are you doing here?" She asked, apprehensively. She wasn't allowed visitors inside the cell, no guard had let them in, and it wasn't exactly normal visiting hours. Both men looked decidedly nervous. It didn't take a genius to figure something was going on here, and she didn't like the look or feel of it.

Gideon moved closer. "We don't have much time, Angel. We're going to get you out of here."

Angel stood, listening in disbelief and growing anger, as Gideon explained quickly that they were there to break her out of jail. Her eyes darted to Luke, as he removed a hypo from his rucksack and explained about the drug he would to use.

"It will be totally painless, but will give the appearance that you're dead. Not even a doctor will be able

to find any life signs using a hand held medical scanner..." When Raven saw Angel's face go pale, he continued quickly to reassure her. "It will be as if you're in a deep coma. I assure you, it's quite safe and will have no side effects."

Before Angel could say anything, Gideon went on. "It's the only way to do this. It's too risky to try and get you out the way we came in. This way your 'body' will be discovered, Luke will be called to examine you, and his diagnosis will be that you've suffered a brain hemorrhage. You'll be declared dead, and your 'body' will be taken up to the Excalibur, put into stasis until we are safely away from Mars, then Luke will revive you."

Angel couldn't believe that they were actually suggesting that she should escape. Whichever way she did it, alive or dead, [And I'm sure as hell not keen on the 'dead' idea, no matter how safe Luke says it is!] it was still escaping. Well, Angel was damned if she was going to run. She had some of her strength back, and she had made up her mind to make a stand and fight the charges.

Angel fixed her gaze on Gideon, her eyes narrowing slightly, as she wondered why he was doing this. Her inner voice began to nag at the back of her mind about his motives. [He thinks I'm guilty, and that this is the only way to save me.] Well she WAS innocent and she wasn't going to run. Lifting her chin stubbornly, Angel shook her head, her voice strong and determined. "No. Absolutely not! I won't do it."

Gideon's eyes widened, and he looked at Luke, whose eyebrows were raised in surprise. Then he looked back at Angel. "Angel, don't do this."

"Don't do what, Captain? Stay and fight for my innocence? Well sorry, the only thing I am NOT going to do is what you are suggesting." Taking a step closer, Angel lifted her head to look him straight in the eye. "Tell me something, just why are you doing this?"

Luke moved away from where he was standing beside Gideon, closer to Angel. He spoke before Gideon could respond. "Because this will buy us time to prove your innocence and find the real killers."

Angel looked at Luke, her temper softening a little. She was getting angry but not with him, because she felt that Luke believed in her innocence, unlike Gideon. "Thank you, Luke. I believe that's why you're helping but..." Pausing, her eyes returned to Gideon, her expression hardening again. "But I want to know why the Captain is doing this. It sure isn't because he believes that I'm innocent."

"That is not true! Angel, I do believe that you're innocent, that's why we're doing this."

Angel snorted loudly. "I don't believe you..." She stopped as a thought struck her. "Are my sisters aware of what you're doing?"

Luke stepped in to answer her question softly. "Yes they are. We have their full support. They even wanted to be here, helping us, but we couldn't let them get involved because of the children. They're afraid that despite your innocence, you'll be found guilty. This way buys us more time to prove that you didn't kill Nikarran."

Angel pursed her lips as she thought about that. She couldn't help but feel a little surprised and disappointed that Demon had agreed to this, especially after that afternoon, when Angel had explained that she was determined to prove herself in court. Demon had promised to do whatever she could to help keep her sister from being mind-wiped. In hindsight, Angel now realized that what Demon had said could fit with the fact that she had agreed to this breakout. Demon had never actually said

anything about being there for the trial. Angel guessed she could understand it. Demon and her sisters knew that Angel was innocent, but were afraid of losing her. They loved her and would do whatever they thought necessary to keep her safe.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on Gideon. "You're only doing this for Demon. If I'm found guilty and mind-wiped, she'll blame you, and you'll lose her. You're not breaking me out because you think I am innocent, you're doing it so that Demon won't hate you!" Angel's voice broke slightly, and if she weren't so angry, she would have started crying, because she was hurt that he didn't believe her innocence. [Why should he believe me when he hates me?] But she wasn't going to show how she felt. Squaring her shoulders, holding her head high, Angel waited for him to respond.

And respond he did. "God dammit, we don't have time for you to be stubborn and silly about this. I wouldn't be doing this if I thought you were guilty, not even for your sister!" Gideon moved forward angrily, but Luke stopped him by putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Matt." Luke's voice was soft, but warning.

Gideon closed his eyes and grabbed hold of his temper before he lost it completely. [Letting Angel get to you isn't useful right now, Matt.] Sighing, he looked at Luke and nodded, then looked back at Angel. This time his voice was calm, rational. "Look Angel, I *do* believe you. Yes, I'm partly doing this for Deborah. I don't want her to lose you, not after she just got you back. I know you didn't kill Nikarran but the odds are stacked against you. You've been framed, and the evidence and eyewitness testimony against you, although fabricated, are solid. The chances of Magnusson disproving the charge and getting you off are slim to none."

Gideon paused as he moved toward Angel and lifted his hand to her shoulder, but his hand fell away as she shrugged it off, lifting her chin in annoyance at him. "I know that you want to stay and prove your innocence, but there isn't time for that now. The trial is this evening, and Magnusson has no idea how to clear you. This way there's no chance of you being found guilty and mind-wiped, and like Luke said, it buys us time to find who really killed Nikarran and clear your name."

Angel listened as Gideon spoke, "You really believe that I'm innocent?"

Gideon nodded and smiled gently. "Of course I do. This is the best way. I know you want to stand trial, but Angel, it doesn't look good. This is much safer. Please don't fight our help. Don't put your life at risk like this." Gideon suddenly realized just how important it was to him, that Angel should be safe. One way or the other, he would make sure of it.

Angel looked at the two men standing in front of her, watching her expectantly. She could see them both getting impatient. [Worried that they'll get caught, no doubt.] She was starting to feel pressured into doing something that in her heart she really didn't want to do, even though logically it made sense and was safer. But she had found her strength again, and she had never run from a fight before.

Taking a deep breath, Angel shook her head. "No. I'm not going to run. I've done too much of that lately. Whichever way you get me out of here, it's still escaping and makes me look guilty. I'm staying to face this." She finished stubbornly.

Gideon looked at Angel in astonishment. He grabbed her arm and swung her around. "Dammit, this isn't just stupidity, this is suicide!" Gideon barked into her face.

At first Angel felt fear, but his words enraged her, and she found the strength to wrench herself out of his hold, pushing him away as she yelled at him. "Don't you dare call me stupid! I'm doing what I feel is right. You may think this is the best way, but I don't. I want to stay and fight, and that is exactly what I am going to do. You and your escape plan can go to hell!"

Gideon moved forward, glaring down at her. "Do you want to be mind-wiped Angel? Because I guarantee that's what is going to happen if you insist on standing trial!"

Gideon let go of Angel suddenly, as he registered the look of fear in her eyes. Inhaling a deep breath, he stepped back from her. Angel glanced around and saw Luke's concern etched on his face, and she knew that Luke was worried about how out of control things had become.

"Angel..." Gideon began gently, but Angel hissed at him.

"No! I've heard enough from you! Now I suggest that both of you go, before I scream loud enough to bring every damned guard in this place running in here!"

Gideon could see that Angel meant it, and suddenly he saw in her something that had been missing when he had first seen her in the church. Some of her old fire had returned to her eyes, and he knew that she wasn't going to go willingly. [Time for Plan B.] Demon had warned him that Angel might not agree to this. Before they had left, he and Luke had discussed what they would do, if Angel resisted.

He looked at Luke, who nodded slightly. Gideon saw Luke slip his hand into the rucksack, unseen by Angel, who was too busy glaring at Gideon to notice what Luke was doing. [Good.] Now, he had to distract her enough to get his hands on her, to prevent her from screaming. Although Galen had assured him that his shield would keep any sound from being heard outside the cell, Gideon wasn't about to take the risk. [She can probably scream loud enough to wake the dead.]

"Scream all you want Angel, no one will hear you." He smiled maliciously.

Angel stared at him open-mouthed. She narrowed her eyes, her chest rising and falling with each angry breath she took, unaware of Luke, who now had the hypo in his hand, hiding it behind his back, nodding to Gideon that he was ready. "You think that I'm joking, Captain? If it gets you out of here, I'll scream like a banshee!"

"You can scream as loud as you like, but it won't make any difference." Gideon kept his tone purposely condescending.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Gideon nodded at the door behind her, still smiling. "Just that Galen is outside, with a shield that's covering any noise that may come out of this cell." Mentioning the Technomage's name got the result he'd hoped for. Angel's face contorted with rage, and her head whipped round to look at the door.

Gideon moved like lightening, grabbing Angel and twisting her, so that her back was to him. He

tightened one arm around her, securing one of her arms to her side, while his other hand came up to clamp over her mouth, silencing her. He grunted as she struggled violently against him, causing some pain to his injured hand, but he held her fast as her free hand came up wildly, trying to pry his hand away from her mouth. He winced as her nails dug painfully into the back of his hand.

"Now Luke!" Yelled Gideon, as he turned the struggling Angel around to face the doctor.

Angel's heart was beating frantically in her chest, and she tried with all of her strength to break loose. She wished desperately that she still had her telekinetic ability. If she had, Gideon would now be plastered to the wall behind them, painfully regretting doing this to her. Her eyes widened as she felt herself swung around to face Luke, panic setting in as she saw the doctor approaching her, the hypo in his hand.

"I'm sorry, Angel, but we have to do this." Placing the hypo in the pocket of his jacket, Luke pulled her hand away from where she was clawing at Gideon's hand, held over her mouth. Pulling Angel's arm straight towards him, he skillfully undid the button of her cuff and pushed the sleeve up her arm, turning it so that the inside of her elbow was facing up. He reached into his pocket for the hypo, then quickly inserted the needle into a vein, pressing down on the plunger, injecting the drug into her.

When it was done, Luke put the hypo back in his pocket and pulled her sleeve down, redoing the button. Angel made one more frantic attempt to get loose, but she couldn't shift Gideon's hold on her. She tried to pull her free hand away from Luke, but her strength was vanishing quickly and she was growing unbelievably weak and tired, her eyelids impossibly heavy, as the drug started to take effect. [I don't want this...] It was her last thought as darkness descended, and she slipped quickly into unconsciousness.

Gideon felt Angel's body go limp. Dropping his hand from her mouth, he picked her up in his arms, her head falling against his shoulder. He looked at her for a moment then at Luke. "That was quick."

Luke nodded. "I told you it would be. Let's get her on the bed." Turning, he walked to the bed, pulled the blanket down and waited as Gideon walked over and gently put Angel down. Then Luke quickly examined her.

Gideon watched as Luke lifted Angel's eyelids, then checked her pulse. [Or rather her lack of one.] He reminded himself of Luke's assurances that the drug was perfectly safe, as he saw how deathly pale Angel had gone, her skin rapidly taking on the blue-gray tinge that one saw on a corpse. He didn't have to be a doctor to tell that, by all appearances, she wasn't breathing. "Luke?"

Luke straightened and looked at Gideon. "She's fine, Matt. The drug is working perfectly." He could see that Gideon was unsure, and he patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, she's alive."

Gideon sighed and smiled thankfully. "Good to hear Luke. I'd hate to have to face her sisters, if something went wrong."

"You and me both. We'd be better off spacing ourselves, before they got to us," said Luke with a grin, then continued seriously. "Don't worry, nothing has gone wrong, the drug is working as it should."

Gideon smiled again and moved to the side of the bed, pulling the blanket up, covering Angel. Reaching a hand to her hair, he gently stroked it and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "When you wake up you'll be safe on board the Excalibur with your sisters." Rolling her onto her side, facing the wall, he resisted the urge to kiss her forehead, and straightened up. It was time to get going.

"We'd better clear out. It's gone four and we've been here longer than I would have preferred," said Gideon, as he moved past Luke toward the door. He waited as Luke picked up his rucksack and put the hypo inside. Glancing at Angel again, Gideon wondered briefly what would happen when she woke on board the Excalibur.

"You're thinking about what her reaction is going to be when I revive her, aren't you?" Gideon blinked and looked at Luke, who was now standing beside him, also watching Angel.

"I thought John was the telepath around here. But you're right. I think it's a safe bet that she's going to be upset with us." He responded with a small laugh.

"That's an understatement," returned Luke with a soft chuckle.

"We'd better get going. It'll take a couple of hours to get back to the hotel, and I need to call Deborah in an hour or so to let her know that it's clear for her to get down here for Phase three."

They left the cell quickly, locking it behind them. Using Galen's shield, they retraced their path, back through the security door, relocking it after them, careful not to leave any sign of their ever having been there. They retreated to the disgusting bathroom, then back down the drain, into the main tunnels. They had just made it back into the main tunnel system under Mars dome, where they could at least stand upright, when Gideon checked his commlink and saw that it was 05:30.

Punching in the code for Deborah's commlink, she answered almost immediately and he spoke the sentence chosen to let her know it was clear for her to move. "The unicorn is in the barn."

There was a pause before she responded, letting him know that she understood and was on her way. "I'll bring the hay."

Gideon turned to his companions. "Right. Back to the hotel. We need to be there when Carr calls. If she calls. It's all up to Deborah now.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

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