

The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble - Part 5: New Horizons

by The Space Witches

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Lily in her handfasting gown.

Chapter 1

Demon headed towards the Medbay room, where Angel was safely hidden away. As she rounded the corner, she saw Galen emerging, pausing just outside the doorway to pull up the hood of his coat. She stopped to watch as he then turned and headed away from her, never having seen her standing there, observing him. When he disappeared around the far corner, she moved forward again, wondering about what had obviously been a meeting between him and her sister. She hadn't been able to see his

face to judge by his expression how it had gone, nor had she sensed any strong emotions from the Technomage, by which to gauge what he was feeling.

Demon shook her head and smiled. It was somewhat of a surprise that the Mage had actually left the room in one piece, considering how Angel felt about him. [Maybe they've reconciled,] thought Demon. Well, she guessed she would find out soon enough.

She stopped as she arrived outside the door to Angel's Medbay room, adjusting the big carryall that she had slung over her right shoulder, as she keyed in the code to open the door. Thoughts of Galen were temporarily pushed to the back of her mind, as she thought about the disguise that she had arranged for Angel, to allow her to get to Lily's hand-fasting without risk of being recognized. [I can feel another fight coming on.] Well, she had to admit she wouldn't blame her sister this time. The disguise she had come up with was... Well, to say the least, it was not something Angel was very fond of, but it would serve the purpose of keeping Angel unrecognizable.

The door opened and Demon took a deep breath, put a big smile on her face, and entered.

Demon hesitantly removed the disguise from the carryall and lifted it up to show Angel. Just as she had suspected, there was an immediate response. "Oh no, forget it, Demon. You haven't got a snowball's hope in hell of me getting dressed up in that!" Angel said stubbornly, as she backed away from Demon, pointing at the outfit in horror and disgust.

Demon sighed, saying nothing, as she placed the outfit on the bed, then looked across at Angel patiently. "Come on, Angel, it's not that bad, and wearing it you won't be recognized at all." She watched as Angel's jaw clenched and her eyes flashed mutinously, as she eyed the outfit on the bed for a second, then looked back at her sister.

"Well, I wouldn't have to be disguised in the first place, if I hadn't been brought up here against my will..."

Demon cut her off, before she could go any further. "Angel, let's not go there again, please. Look, I know you're still upset about that, but you know in your heart that it was the only way. Besides, it won't be for long, just until Galen can get hold of the Nikarran's killers and bring them to justice. Then you won't have to hide out like this." She smiled gently as she approached her sister and put her left hand on her shoulder, while Angel looked up at her, her eyes a mixture of anger and sadness. "I know this is hard for you, darling, but just be strong about this for a little while longer, OK?"

Demon could see Angel wrestling with her emotions, but finally she smiled and nodded. "OK." Demon smiled and hugged her sister, then pulled away to turn back and pick up the outfit, intending to hand it to Angel, who again shook her head stubbornly. "I'm still not going dressed like that to Lily's hand-fasting!"

Demon let out a small, frustrated growl. "You won't have to. Lily has a change of clothes there waiting for you." She softened her impatience with a gentle smile, relieved when she saw her sister relax a little at the knowledge that she wouldn't have to attend the ceremony dressed up like this. But she could still see that there was resistance to the idea. [Time to offer some incentive.] Dropping the disguise back on the bed, she smiled cheerfully at her sister.

"After the hand-fasting, you'll only have to come back here for tonight." She paused as she watched

her sister's eyes widen in surprise. She continued quickly, "Your quarters have been arranged. You'll still have to remain hidden here until we leave Mars, but once we're in hyperspace, you'll be able to move into your new quarters and about the Excalibur without disguise. Under a false name of course, until you're cleared."

That little bit of news seemed to be the incentive that was needed to bribe her sister into wearing the disguise, because she could see Angel's face break into a smile at the thought of no longer being isolated in Medbay. "Really?"

Demon nodded. "Yes, it's all ready and waiting for you, including some things that I'm sure you'll be happy to see again," she said cheerfully, looking forward to seeing her sister's face when she saw all the personal belongings they'd brought for her from Eriadne. She saw that Angel was about to ask what, but she held up her hand as she saw the time display on the Comm unit. "That will have to wait."

Angel opened her mouth. "But..."

"Angel, we don't want to be late for the hand-fasting, do we?" Angel sighed and nodded, while Demon smiled encouragingly.

"Now come on, let's get you into this. Just think, the sooner you get dressed in it and we get to the hand-fasting, the sooner you can get out of it." Demon picked up the outfit and handed it to her sister, who looked it up and down as if it were the most horrifying thing she had ever seen, then looked at Demon.

"Just one thing, Demon? Why a clown costume?"

Demon had to hide her amusement at her sister's reaction. It had always tickled her that Angel had a phobia about, of all things, clowns. Demon explained about the Excalibur's new mission and about the crew they had come to Mars to collect. She went on to tell Angel about the party they had arranged for the families and children of the new crewmembers joining them, to ease the difficulty of parting.

"So you see, having a clown walking about won't look odd at all. Anyone who sees you will just think that you're part of the entertainment. Matthew will be at the party to get it started, then he'll slip away to join us. Fortunately, our babies are too young to be there anyway, so Ilas has all the kids in her quarters, while Lily is waiting for us," grinned Demon, while Angel didn't look amused at all.

"But why do I have to be a clown?" asked Angel, in mild distress.

Demon patted her hand. "Oh darling, I know you don't like clowns, but it really is the best disguise, no one will ever guess it's you in a million years." She watched as Angel snorted.

"You know very well I don't just not like clowns. I hate them, they're evil, and I'm not going to become one." Demon had to swallow the laughter that bubbled up at the tone in Angel's voice as she spoke. She sounded just like a petulant little child. Unfortunately, she was unable to hide her grin, and Angel glared at her.

"This is not funny, Demon!" pouted Angel.

Demon cleared her throat and tried to look serious. "I know, but honestly it's the only way. Now come on, stop being a baby about this, we're going to be late." Angel pouted a little more, then sighed as she

resigned herself to her fate.

"Fine, but if I see myself in a mirror and have a heart attack, it'll be on your head!" With reluctance and a lot of muttering and cursing under her breath, Angel began undressing and putting on the clown outfit, with Demon watching, trying not to smile too broadly.

Demon concentrated on applying the clown makeup onto Angel's face, using her left hand, as her right was still immobile within the black glove Luke had insisted that she wore. Angel sat rigidly on the edge of the bed, tugging at the frilly cuff of the clown suit. Demon didn't have to be an empath to know that her sister was not happy about this. She decided it would probably help to keep Angel's mind off what she was wearing if she changed the subject.

Pausing to apply some more white face paint onto a sponge, she looked down at Angel and decided to ask about her meeting with Galen. "I saw Galen leaving earlier..." She trailed off, hoping that her sister would follow it up by telling her what had happened. But the only response she got was a small, "Hmmm." Demon could see that the direct approach was needed.

"Well, what happened?"

There was a long silence from Angel, before she finally spoke. "He came to see me, apologized for what happened back on Eriadne, I accepted his apology. He told me that he was going stay behind to prove my innocence and catch the real murderers. I won't say that things are like they were between us before but..." Angel's voice trailed off. She shrugged then continued. " We've agreed to try and be friends again, and I guess..."

"Guess what, darling?" asked Demon softly, as she continued applying the final touches to her sister's makeup.

Angel sighed. "I guess I would like that. I mean not just because Galen is going to do whatever he can to clear my name, but also," Angel smiled before continuing, "Because I've never met anyone who I could talk to about Shakespeare like I can with Galen. And how can I carry on hating someone who cast such a wonderfully diabolical spell on Lieutenant Carr?" She looked up at her sister, and both of them started laughing.

"I don't think she'll forget that one in a hurry," said Demon, as finally both of them managed to stop laughing, and she was able to apply the last touches to Angel's disguise, bringing both of them back to the here and now.

Demon picked up the purple, orange and yellow fluffy wig and put it over Angel's own hair, carefully tucking any stray raven strands under it. The whole time Angel remained silent, looking as if at any second she was going to jump off the bed and tear off the costume. Her rebellion really showed up when Demon picked up the red nose and quickly placed it over her sister's nose, then stepped back to survey her handy work.

Angel stood up to go and look in the mirror over the basin in the corner. When she saw her reflection she spun around shaking her head. "There is no way in hell I am stepping out of this room looking like this!" Demon had to rush forward and grab both of her hands, before she could yank off the red nose and wig.

"Angel, don't you dare. I put a lot of work into this. It's not that bad, honestly, and it won't be for long!" She had to force her sister's arms to her sides then hugged her, aware that this couldn't be easy.

In the middle of a serious situation, it must feel like insult was being added to injury. She felt Angel's arms come around her as she hugged Demon back. Finally, they pulled apart and Demon was pleased to see a small smile on her sister's face.

"I'm being impossible, aren't I?" asked Angel, sheepishly.

Demon smiled at her. "No more than usual." They grinned at each other until Demon took her sister's hand in hers. "Come on, the sooner we get there, the sooner you can get dressed up in a manner more befitting your sister's hand-fasting ceremony." Demon led her sister towards the door, and as it opened, felt Angel tug on her hand, bringing her up short. Demon turned, expecting her sister to give her a hard time about leaving the room.

"Just one thing, I hope you warned the others. So much as a snigger or a smile in my direction when they see me, and they are dead meat!" Demon didn't get a chance to respond as with head held high, Angel pulled her hand away and walked forcefully out of the room--well, as forcefully as anyone could when they were wearing large floppy shoes--leaving Demon staring after her, somewhat dumbfounded.

Angel turned to look at her sister, as she stood there unmoving. "Well, what are you waiting for? You don't want us to be late do you?" Demon burst out laughing and joined Angel, as she led her down the corridor in the direction of the bullet car that would take them to where the hand-fasting was going to be held.

Angel peeked out the door at the small group that was gathering in the hydroponics gardens. [And a rather motley crew at that,] she thought. [Two witches, four babies, and one each of a starship captain, a xenoarcheologist, a thief, a pilot and a Technomage. All sitting together on stools, among trees in the middle of a starship.]

The gardens were one of the new additions to the Excalibur, and were meant to provide the crew with fresh foodstuffs on their long new mission. They had several sections with differing climates, according to the needs of the diverse edible plants that the species now living on the ship required. Angel especially liked the section where they had chosen to hold Lily, John and Luke's hand-fasting--an orchard with various fruit trees, which doubled as a recreational area. When she'd entered it with Demon--relieved to find Lily waiting alone, so she didn't have to bear John and Luke's amused reaction to her outfit--Angel had immediately been reminded of the orchard on Eriadne, where she'd used to spend many hours reading among the trees. She'd quickly banished that thought. There was an important task she had to concentrate on.

She was surprised by just how much she was looking forward to performing the hand-fasting ritual for her little pagan sister. Demon had told her the news during the ride on the bullet-car. She'd smiled broadly and said, "It seems we'll need a Priestess to perform a hand-fasting later today. Would you like the job?"

Angel had gawked at her for several seconds, trying to get her brain around what Demon had just said. "Priestess?"

Demon had nodded and explained why Lily, John and Luke had decided to take this step at such short notice, and why they wanted Angel to officiate. Angel had found herself deeply touched once more by her sisters' loyalty to her. "I'd be honored," she'd whispered with tears in her eyes.

Lily had brought one of Angel's favorite dresses--red, of course--and for her role as Priestess during the ritual, a red cape to wear over it. When Lily had shown Angel the dress she planned to wear for the hand-fasting, Angel had gasped. "It's wonderful, Lily!"

Lily had beamed and explained that she'd made it herself a few years ago on Eriadne, but hadn't found an occasion to wear it. "So I figured if I don't wear it on this occasion, I never will," she'd said, passing her hand over the lace at the sleeves.

"Hmm, not bad, a bit frilly though," Demon had quipped, her face unmoving, but her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Oh, Angel, you should have seen us shopping for Demon's wedding dress on Mars." Lily had proceeded to tell in detail--supported, interrupted and contradicted by Demon--how they'd wandered from shop to shop, arguing and at one point getting dangerously close to a catfight in the middle of a very exclusive shop, with the sales clerk discreetly beating a hasty retreat, until they'd found the cheongsam that finally satisfied both of them. They'd still been doubled over with laughter when Luke and John had shown up for the rehearsal.

Demon had then excused herself and said she'd come back with Gideon for the actual ritual. "I have to go join Matthew at the farewell-party, just for a few minutes. Apparently, it's expected of the Captain's wife." Angel could see that her sister was trying hard to hide her delight in that title.

John had organized everything they'd need for the ritual according to Lily's and Angel's wishes, and after the rehearsal, the two sisters had retreated into the equipment room again, to change Lily into her dress and do her hair and make-up--but also for Angel to center and ground herself in preparation for the ceremony with Lily's help. John and Luke had then joined them to wait until their family and friends had arrived.

When everybody had settled on their seats, Angel looked back at the bride and grooms to make sure they were ready, then took one last deep breath and stepped out of the room, followed by Lily, John and Luke. She heard appraising murmurs and saw happy smiles but pushed those impressions away to dwell on later, when she had taken off her red Priestess' cape.

Demon smiled appraisingly at Lily, as she caught her eye when she, John and Luke entered the orchard behind Angel. *[[It may be frilly, but this dress looks perfect on you Lily,]]* she sent, earning a grateful touch of her little sister's mind with an amused side-note that she'd unintentionally made a rhyme.

The dress was a work of art, and Demon couldn't even fathom how many hours Lily must have spent creating it. It was made of crushed velvet with lace down the front, on the cuffs and around the neckline as well as in the long train, while Lily's breasts were covered by silk, all in an aquamarine shade. It had an open laced back, and the sleeves flowed down from her elbows in generous waves of velvet and silk. The discrete make-up, hair softly swept up at the sides and the simple beaded necklace and earrings of the same color, completed the picture. John and Luke, in a black and light gray suits respectively, walked on either side of Lily, holding her hands up between them. The three of them were fairly radiating happiness.

"Did I have a silly grin like that pasted on my face at our wedding?" Matthew suddenly murmured to her, nodding towards John and Luke.

Demon turned to look at him, chuckling slightly. "Well, if you did, so did I," she whispered back.

Matthew sighed quietly. "If we had any pictures, I'd have to get rid of them." He cocked his head to grin at her, and his eyes were so full of love that Demon knew that no matter how silly their grins may have been at their wedding, he'd never have been able to destroy one single picture. She suppressed a sigh at not having any such pictures to destroy. They'd never got to that part of the wedding. Events had overtaken them. Demon leaned into Matthew's embrace as Angel started to speak, and they held Marcus between them on their knees, so he could see what was happening in front of them.

"Welcome, loved ones, as we gather to celebrate the marriage of Lilith, John and Luke. Divine One, I ask thee to bless them, their love, and their marriage as long as they shall live in love together. May they all enjoy a long life filled with joy, love, stability and fertility."

Angel turned to starboard, which they had deemed east, and lifted her arms. "Blessed be by the element of air. May you be blessed with communication, intellectual growth, and wisdom."

She turned to the south, at the stern. "Blessed be by the element of fire. May you be blessed with harmony, vitality, creativity, and passion."

Facing west or portside, Angel said, "Blessed be by the element of water. May you be blessed with friendship, intuition, caring, understanding, and love."

Finally she faced north, represented by the bow. "Blessed be by the element of earth. May you be blessed with tenderness, happiness, compassion, and sensuality."

Angel turned back to face them all and continued, "When there are those of us who love enough to make a commitment such as this one tonight between Lilith, John and Luke, the very stars rejoice at the rediscovery of love, joy, and bounty." She let her eyes wander from one face to another as she continued, "Lilith, John and Luke have gathered before their friends and family to make a statement of their commitment to each other and to their love," then returned her gaze to the bride and grooms. "Do you now commit to each other to love, honor, respect each other, to communicate with each other? To never let anger divide you? To provide a good loving home for your children? Be a support and comfort for your partners in times of sickness and health, as long as love shall last?"

In unison they said, "We do."

Angel nodded and smiled. "In marriage you do not lose yourself; you add something new, a relationship, the capacity to merge into one another without losing sight of your individual self. Together, speak to us of who you are as a triad, and as a family with your children."

Max and Dureena, who had been holding Faylinn and Dasha, handed them to Lily. She cradled the twins in her arms, with John and Luke standing beside her and supporting her arms with theirs.

"We are different, distinctive personalities, but when we join, we become one family, working together for the good of the whole, like the members of a wolf pack," John said.

Lily added, "There is so much trust that we can accept not knowing everything about each other, yet rest secure in the knowledge that anything we do share will be accepted, respectfully."

Luke continued, "We nurture each other's body, mind and soul, like the different parts of a tree provide nurture for all the other parts, so they all can grow and prosper together."

Angel took a green cord off the altar, while Lily handed the twins back to Max and Dureena, then Angel asked John, Lilith and Luke to hold out their left hands. When they did, she joined them, so John and Luke held Lily's hand between theirs. Murmuring a blessing spell, she wrapped the cord around John's wrist three times, around their clasped hands three times, around Lily's wrist three times, and so on, then tied the ends in three knots. Holding her hands above theirs, palm down, she said, "I call upon the elements and the Source to witness this bonding and look favorably upon the three lovers joined in it. May they give John, Lilith and Luke strength in the hand-fasting." Angel looked up at them, smiling at each in turn, then unbound their hands and gave them the cord to keep as a reminder of this ceremony. "Do you wish to exchange vows?"

"Yes," they answered in unison, and Angel nodded for them to proceed.

They stood in a triangle, joining their hands in its center, and vowed in unison, "Heart to thee, soul to thee, body to thee and no others, while we all shall love."

When they looked at each other, their eyes so obviously full of love for each other, Angel felt a stab of pain in her heart for a moment. [No time for that, you aren't Angel now, you are the Priestess.] She raised her voice again and said, "I now pronounce you married. May you each and together be blessed with health, happiness, harmony, and love. So mote it be!"

John, Lily and Luke hugged and kissed each other, and while their friends and family got up to congratulate them, Angel shed her cape, and with it the Priestess attitude, suddenly realizing that her cheeks were wet. She wiped the tears away, before making her way to the newlyweds, trying to control the feelings that rose inside her now that she had changed back to being Angel. She looked at her younger sister and her two men, struggling for words. When Angel finally spoke, she was surprised that her voice didn't sound as shaky as she'd expected. "This is a wonderful day for you, but also for me, because seeing your love for each other gives me hope that one day I might be able to find a love of my own."

Lily drew Angel into a tight hug, wishing she could share some of her happiness with her sister. "Of course you will, Angel! You have so much love inside. The universe wants and needs for it to be given and lived." She leaned back to look up at her raven-haired sister. "The ritual was so beautiful, Angel. We'll never be able to thank you enough for making this day even more special."

Lily hugged her again, and when she let go, Luke stepped up to hug and thank Angel. Even John, usually so hesitant about touching others, drew her sister into his arms and kissed her cheek, making Angel blush when he said, "Thank you, Angel. It means a lot to us that you performed this ritual. It was wonderful."

The others around them voiced their agreement, drawing an embarrassed smile from Angel. "It was my honor and my pleasure," she murmured.

Lily took her hands in hers. "Would you do something else for us?"

"Of course." Angel looked down at her curiously.

Lily nodded at Ilas, who bent down to Faylinn and Dasha's baskets, took the coverlets off and handed them to her sister. Lily took them and held them out to Angel, explaining, "After the twins were born, we held a little blessing ritual on Eriadne. I left one pair of yarn ties on each coverlet for you. Would you tie them now?"

Angel blinked several times, as the implications of what Lily had said sunk in. [They were waiting for me to return. They never forgot me or hated me for what I did. They kept on loving me and *wanted* me to come back!] She was dangerously close to tears again, as relief, joy and love for her sisters rose inside her, but she managed to hold them back, as she looked from Lily to Ilas, to Demon, trying to express with her eyes what she couldn't with words or her mind. Finally, her eyes returned to Lily's. "What do I have to do?"

"Tie the yarns, and while you do so, name something you value and wish for the babies."

For a while Angel thought, then nodded, and Lily held Faylinn's coverlet out to her. "I wish you to love wisely," Angel said as she tied the last pair of yarns. For Dasha, she wished, "To never lose the ones you love."

With a beaming smile, Lily said, "Now the coverlets really are complete."

They had prepared some non-alcoholic drinks and snacks for a short celebration before they transferred the link from Ilas to Angel, as Max, his women and son had to leave immediately after that.

Lily was just talking to Galen, when Luke touched her elbow. "Sorry to interrupt, but there's something you need to see," he murmured.

Lily followed him to the side of the garden where John was already waiting. Looking at her men curiously and noticing the sparkle in their eyes, she asked, "What are you up to?"

Ignoring her question, Luke told Lily to close her eyes. She looked up at him wide-eyed, apparently trying to gauge what he had planned.

John felt her flinch when his hands suddenly covered her eyes. He said in a low teasing voice, "Don't you trust us?"

Lily giggled. "I do, but you should know by now how curious I am!" John felt her close her eyes obediently under his hands, but he could tell how excited she was. He nodded at Luke, who smiled at him and reached around Lily's neck to take off her necklace, then again to put on a new one. When he was finished, he nodded at John to remove his hands. Their family and friend's conversations had stopped in the meantime, and everyone was watching to see Lily's reaction.

"You can open them now." John stepped round to stand beside Luke, who was holding Lily's small mirror out to her as she did.

Lily took it into her left hand, holding it so it showed her throat, and gasped, "Dear Mother! Luke, this is... it's beautiful!" Her right hand was fingering the tear-shaped pendant of a bright orange stone that hung around her neck on a delicate gold chain. She looked up at Luke, who was grinning from ear to ear, just like John. "What... how...?"

Both men chuckled.

"It's a fire opal, and I got it while you and Demon were shopping for her wedding dress," Luke said. "At first, I was looking for an emerald, but the color of this reminded me so much of your hair that I just had to go with it. At one point, I almost ran into you two when I left a shop. I saw Demon just in time, so I could duck back in. Good thing she stands out above a crowd. If you'd been there alone, I'd probably have bumped right into you." He grinned widely as Lily shook her head in amazement, then added, "But something is still missing." He held out his closed hand to her, palm down.

Lily frowned briefly, smiling and shaking her head, wondering what would follow now, then held out her open hand under Luke's. He let something drop into it, and when he withdrew his hand, Lily found a pair of matching earrings in her palm. After a few seconds, she looked up at Luke again, unable to find words that could express what she felt.

"Come on, put them on," Luke nudged gently, and she took off the earrings she was wearing and gave them to John. After she'd put in the fire opals, Lily looked up at her men, smiling softly.

"Fire opals for our Fire Lily," John murmured, and Lily shook her head.

"There are no words to express how much I love you, Luke Raven and John Matheson." She opened her arms and drew them into a tight embrace, thanking them with a deep kiss, accompanied by clapping and whooping.

When they finally loosened their grip on each other, Lily heard someone clear their throat. They turned around to find Galen stepping forth.

"I hate to disturb this happy moment, but it is time to commence the transfer ritual."

"What the hell is going on in there?" Gideon turned to ask his First Officer, as they stood in the hallway outside the gardens. Galen had chased the sisters' partners and friends out of the orchard, telling them to take the children to Medbay and leave them there. The Technomage had instructed them all to return and wait in the corridor, until the time was right and then to enter.

Gideon has asked the inevitable question, "How will we know when the time is right?"

Galen's response came in his most imposing voice, "You will know."

Gideon had sighed, thinking to himself that there had certainly been advantages to the Technomage's long absence and not having to put up with that pretentious, conceited, self-important, arrogant, affected... he pulled himself up short, telling himself that he'd get Deborah to add a few more adjectives later.

Returning from Medbay, they had found the door to the gardens shut and immovable, despite whatever commands the Captain or XO gave. Even Raven's medical override had failed. Gideon had eventually given up. "I guess when the doors open, the time will be right." Patience had never been one of his virtues, so he'd paced the corridor, knowing that he was irritating the hell out of Max, Dureena, Raven and Trace Miller, all of whom stood watching him. John Matheson was used to his Captain, and Gideon knew that his First Officer had given up on being irritated a long time ago.

Gideon had finally stopped and thumped hard on the door, turning to John to ask his question. Matheson shrugged. "I can't read a thing in there. Lily must have a full telepathic block going again. For all I can tell, the gardens are empty, and Galen has kidnapped the women and stolen them away to be his love slaves!"

Gideon roared with laughter as he replied, "Do you have any idea what Deborah would do to him, if he tried to lay a finger on her? And as for Angel, Lily and Ilas... Well, I don't think even a Technomage could take a combined assault from those four."

He stopped speaking and spun around as the doors to the gardens opened and a cloud of thick smoke rolled out along the floor. [Oh give me a break, Galen! Spare us the special effects, will you?]

Gideon turned to the rest of the group, all of who now looked as if they were standing knee deep in a cloud. "I guess that means the time is right. Shall we?" He led the way into the gardens.

As they entered the clearing in the middle of the orchard, Gideon went straight to Deborah, who stood quietly, smiling at him as he entered. He hugged her for a moment then kissed her gently, asking, "Is everything OK?"

Deborah smiled and nodded. "Fine so far, but this is where things get serious. Now, just for once, be a good Captain and do as you're told, OK?"

Gideon kissed her again, murmuring, "Yes, ma'am," as he turned to look at the Technomage.

The Captain could see that the four women had been carefully placed in a triangle, at the center of which stood Galen, with his staff. Deborah stood at one point, Lily at the second and--he shook his head briefly to make sure he wasn't seeing things--two Angels stood at the third point. Obviously, one of them was Ilas, but which? Gideon couldn't tell and from what he could see, neither could Max or Dureena. [Interesting.]

Galen started to give instructions, ordering Gideon and Trace to stand either side of Deborah. John and Luke were placed next to Lily, while Max and Dureena stood by the two Angels.

Gideon couldn't help asking, "What's the significance of our positions, Galen? What do you need us to do?"

Galen sighed deeply as he turned to the Captain. "You have a very important role in this ceremony, Matthew. It's such an onerous duty that I doubt your capacity to perform it single-handedly, which is why I have placed Mr. Miller there to assist you. The role may be beyond your capabilities, but please do try to understand," the Technomage took a deep breath and continued, enunciating each word carefully, "If your wife falls over, you are supposed to catch her. Now, is that too difficult for you, Matthew? Shall I go through it again?"

Gideon sighed and shook his head. "No, I think I can manage that." He looked at Deborah, then at Trace before carrying on, "Then again, she's a big girl. Are you sure two of us will be enough? Maybe Luke could come and help us? John can handle Lily on his own, surely?"

That earned him a thump on the arm from his wife and a chuckle from the Technomage. "Yes, I'm sure Lieutenant Matheson would be quite capable of catching Lilith unassisted, but it will be so much more entertaining to watch him and Dr. Raven competing for the honor. Now, settle down please." Galen turned to Max and Dureena. "Ilas has taken Angel's form to make herself as similar to her sister as possible. This will facilitate the transfer. However, if any of the sisters is likely to suffer pain, or even collapse as a result of this process, it will be Ilas or Angel. Please be ready to provide support to either or both of them." The linguist and the thief nodded seriously. "Then let us begin."

Galen pulled his hood over his head and closed his eyes. Gideon could see his lips moving, then looking at Deborah, realized that she too had her eyes closed, and was whispering strange words. He glanced over at Max and could see that the linguist was concentrating fiercely, obviously trying to understand the words that all four of the sisters now seemed to be muttering.

The Technomage suddenly banged his staff into the ground, and three streams of light and energy emerged from the tip. Gideon watched with concern, as one of the beams struck Deborah's forehead and slammed her head back, almost sending her reeling from her position in the triangle. He quickly raised his arms to catch her, and saw Trace do the same, but after a small wobble, his wife straightened again and resumed her upright position.

Looking around the triangle, Gideon could see that another stream of light appeared to pierce Lily's forehead, while the third stream was directed at Ilas and Angel. The two identical women now stood face-to-face, arms around each other, and the light coming from Galen's staff hit them where their foreheads touched.

Then Deborah started to raise her arms and Lily did the same. One of the Angels raised her right arm, the other her left. More streams of energy came from the women's fingertips and connected, creating a triangle of light and energy, with three central spokes all joining at the tip of the Technomage's staff.

Gideon could feel the hairs on his neck and arms lifting with the static electricity the energy beams generated. The streams of light thickened and brightened as the Technomage and the women continued to chant in their strange language, then Galen started to lift his staff from the ground. The spokes connecting the staff to the women lifted and stretched as they raised into the air, until finally the staff was poised above Galen's head, held tightly at the base in the Mage's clasped hands.

Then a single word was shouted from the five participants throats, a word Gideon couldn't understand, but which was accompanied by a blinding flash of light, as the triangle of energy and the spokes all collapsed inwards, seeming to be sucked back into the staff.

Deborah staggered backwards, and Gideon lunged at her, just catching her as she started to fall. Trace leaped forward and helped him, as Deborah's knees gave way, and together the pilot and the Captain lowered her gently to the ground.

Gideon glanced across the orchard and could see that John was holding Lily in his arms, the tiny redhead also having collapsed. Luke was at the far point of the triangle with Angel, taking her from Max who had caught her as she fell. This allowed Max to join Dureena, who was cradling Ilas, now in her true form, curled up in the thief's arms.

Turning back to look at his wife, Gideon was relieved to see that her eyes were just opening. He stroked her cheek softly, and whispered, "Hey there. Are you OK?"

Deborah nodded, then grimaced, before smiling sadly at him. "Apart from a killer headache, fine." She paused, closing her eyes and licking her dry lips before speaking again. "Matthew? Will you do me a favor?" He nodded. "Go check on Angel for me? I can't sense a damned thing at the moment, and I need to know that she's all right."

Gideon kissed her forehead and asked Trace to stay with her, then went to the other side of the orchard. He paused briefly by Galen as he went, seeing the Technomage looking pale and drawn, leaning heavily on his staff. "Are you OK? Can we do anything?"

Galen straightened and smiled weakly. "Just a little tired. A rather draining procedure I'm afraid, but I believe we were successful."

Gideon nodded his thanks and moved on to where Luke held Angel, running a scanner over her head. The doctor looked up as the Captain arrived and asked, "Can you take her, Matt? I really need both hands for this." Gideon knelt on the ground and took Angel in his arms, trying not to think of the times when he'd held her before, trying not to remember all the terrible things that had happened as a consequence of his inability to act in a civilized manner with this woman. He looked down at her as she lay in his arms, seeing her eyes closed, her face pale, her freckles standing out along her cheekbones, and he felt the familiar stirring that her beauty always produced in him. Gideon vehemently pushed those thoughts and feelings away. That road led to damnation for them all.

Raven ran the scanner across Angel's head and checked the readings, his face showing his concern. Angel's eyelids started to flutter, and Gideon looked down into the crystal blue eyes that had always attracted him so much. As the young witch focused on him and realized who was holding her, she tensed, and the Captain couldn't help but see the fear in her eyes. He sighed and moved to lay her gently on the ground, saying, "It's OK, Angel. Luke will take care of you. I'll go tell Deborah that you've come round."

Gideon looked up at Luke. "Is she OK?"

The doctor nodded. "No damage as far as I can tell. No physical damage anyway."

The Captain retreated across the orchard to his wife, cursing the fact that he'd treated Angel so badly that she couldn't even bear to be touched by him. Then he smiled, as he saw that Trace had followed his instructions with somewhat excessive enthusiasm, and was sitting on the ground with his arms around Deborah. She had her head resting on the young pilot's shoulder and seemed unaware of the fact that Trace was gently running his hands up and down her bare arms.

"Uh Trace? You can let go now." The pilot looked up, startled, and nearly threw Deborah away from him in his haste to unhand her. Gideon chuckled, as he knelt to take his wife back in his arms. He kissed her gently on the cheek, and smiled as she opened her eyes and looked up at him. "What am I going to do with you? We've been married less than a week, I go away for five minutes and when I come back, I find you in the arms of a younger man."

Deborah smiled and laid her head against Gideon's shoulder. "Then you'd better not go away again, had you?" She sighed deeply and closed her eyes before asking, "Is Angel all right?"

Gideon kissed her forehead, saying, "Luke says she's fine physically. Did the transfer work?"

Deborah struggled to sit upright and looked across to her sisters, all of who were now sitting up. Gideon watched as his wife closed her eyes and made contact with the others. Then he heard a cry of delight and turned to see Angel kneeling with her head thrown back, her face showing the happiest smile that Gideon had ever seen. His heart turned over at the sheer beauty of her face when she looked so joyful. [An Angel indeed.] Tears ran down her face unnoticed, as she rejoined her sisters in their mental link.

Behind her, Ilas lay in Dureena's arms, quietly weeping at her loss.

Demon whispered, "Help me get up, please," and started to struggle to her feet. Matthew helped her across the clearing, arriving by Max, Ilas and Dureena, just as John carried Lily over. Demon fell to her knees by Ilas' side and took her from Dureena's arms, rocking her baby sister gently. She felt Lily and Angel's arms surround them, and was aware that their partners had stepped back to allow the sisters this moment together. Demon knew that she was sending her grief at losing her youngest sister, but couldn't stop herself. It was a quiet grief, not the devastating wound that Angel's removal had created, for this time Demon knew that Ilas had chosen this route. It hadn't been forced upon her.

The four of them held each other and Demon felt Lily and Angel reach out with their minds and join to hers. Then she felt another mind join them. Ilas!

The oldest witch looked at the youngest in astonishment. *[[But I thought you'd left us!]]*

Ilas smiled up at Demon, her tears drying, as she realized what had happened. *[[I think I have, but when we actually touch each other, I can still link with you. Which probably means...]]*

Demon initiated the merge and felt herself slip into synch with her sisters, melding with them so closely that her personality almost disappeared. *[[We are four, but we are one.]]*

The merge broke apart and the four sisters stared at each other in joy and amazement. Demon looked up to see the Technomage standing over them, smiling down at them, still leaning on his staff for support.

"I'd hoped that might happen. Ilas won't be able to link except when in physical contact with you, but I was able to leave the ability intact in her mind."

The four sisters gazed up at him and spoke with one word and one mind. "Thank you."

Galen leaned on his staff, drawing power from it to replenish what he had lost in the link transfer ceremony. Despite his words to Gideon, it had been much more draining than the Technomage had anticipated. He hadn't felt this tired since after the attack by his colleagues, which had led to Isabelle's death. The memory of that incident made him feel as if a cloak of depression had descended upon him, and he found it hard to focus on the happiness of the events unfolding in front of him. He had succeeded in his attempt to retain some of the link between the shape-shifter and her sisters, but had paid a higher price in the depletion of the energy supplies to his implants than he'd expected.

He smiled a sad, tired smile, as the sisters thanked him, and he tried to straighten a little as he heard Max say quietly, "It's time to go." The look of sorrow on the four sisters' faces at these words was heartbreaking, and for a moment, Galen could almost believe what Alwyn had been trying to tell him for months. These women were not evil, but were victims of his enemies. The Technomage watched quietly, as Max and Dureena moved to take Ilas from Demon, Max sweeping the little shape-shifter into his arms, obviously intending to carry her to the landing bay.

Demon went to stand by Gideon's side, as the Captain lifted his commlink to his mouth and got confirmation that the shuttle was ready to leave, and that one of the Medbay nurses would take Vya to the landing bay, then he put his arm around his wife's waist and held her tightly to his side.

Matheson and Raven both helped Lily to her feet, the XO holding onto his partner, as the doctor went to help Angel, before turning back to his lovers. Galen couldn't bear to see Angel standing alone while her sisters were supported and surrounded by the people who loved them. He stepped quietly to her side and offered the beautiful young witch his arm. "May I?"

Angel smiled sadly at him, "Thank you, Galen. I'm fine honestly, but I really can't leave here without my disguise. I don't want to have to put that ridiculous outfit on again to say goodbye to my sister, so perhaps I'd better stay here." Galen watched as the tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of not being able to be with her sisters when Ilas left them.

The Technomage moved his staff to the crook of his elbow and took Angel's hand gently, while quoting. "Parting is such sweet sorrow." He smiled and made a gesture with his free hand, enveloping them both in a field of invisibility. "Now, no one can see us. As long as we take care not to bump into anyone, you can go with your sisters to the landing bay." The smile on Angel's face was more than ample reward for the energy this cost him, energy that he could ill afford at that moment.

They both turned at the sound of Gideon's voice. "Good idea, Galen. This way Angel can come to the landing bay with the rest of us. Just don't sneak off and get into mischief elsewhere on my ship, will you? The thought of what you two could get up to while running around here, invisible to the rest of us, terrifies me." Gideon was staring in their general direction, smiling while he held Demon tightly to his side.

Galen leaned towards Angel and whispered, "With my shield of invisibility and your telekinesis, we could run poor Matthew ragged, you know."

Angel's face fell and tears came back into her eyes, as she looked sadly up at the Mage. "I lost my powers, Galen. I can't move things with my mind any more."

Galen smiled softly at her. "Are you sure about that? Now that your link with your sisters is back, I think your other powers might have returned as well. If you look at where Matthew is standing, you'll see that there's an apple on that tree, and it's right above his head. If it was good enough for Sir Isaac Newton, then I think it's good enough for Matthew, don't you?"

A look of pure mischief spread across the young witch's face, and she turned and focused her attention on the apple. It landed on the Captain's head with a satisfying thud and his loud "Ow!" caused both Angel and Galen to smother giggles of delight.

Gideon looked over at where Galen and Angel stood and spoke while rubbing his head. "I may not be able to see either of you, but I just *know* that you both had something to do with that. Now quit fooling around, we have to go." He turned and led the others out of the gardens.

Angel held Galen back for a moment as the others left. Her smile nearly broke Galen's heart as she stood on tiptoe and gently kissed the Technomage's cheek, while breathing into his ear. "Thank you."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

{Part 1: Preparations} {Part 2: Goodbyes and Hellos} {Part 3: Twists and Turns} {Part 4:
Crossroads} {Part 5: New Horizons}