

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four J - Part 1: Gambling Man

by [The Space Witches](#)



Even in white, Angel looks too hot to handle.

Chapter 1

July 2271



Captain Matthew Gideon walked into his wife's bedroom, talking as he entered. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. I think I'm going to be *really* hot in this outfit."

Deborah looked up and growled softly, a sound that sent a shiver down Gideon's spine. Her eyes and her grin widened, both showing unadulterated lust as she purred, "You're damn right you're 'hot' in that outfit. If you need help taking your clothes off, just come a little closer. Let me take you for a ride, cowboy."

The Captain laughed and saluted her with a single finger laid against the brim of his hat. Then he leaned his head back, hooked one thumb into the gun holster he wore slung low around his leather clad hips, pulled back his long black coat with his other hand, and narrowed his eyes, saying, "I hear Amazon Queens are all man haters. I think you might play too rough for

an old fashioned saloon gambler like me."

Deborah grinned again. She looked down to complete the fastening of the leather shin-guards she wore, then stood, displaying her full costume--what little there was of it--to her husband's view. He let out a little growl of his own as he saw the generous expanse of flat belly displayed between the short leather skirt and the bra-like leather top. Deborah's long legs were displayed to advantage by the knee high leather coverings, and the knife hilt she carried on one hip made her look dangerous as well as seductive. Gideon wondered if he would be able to keep his hands to himself for the length of the Masquerade Ball they were due to attend.

He was rather pleased with his own costume, despite the warmth of the leather pants, the high boots, the vest and the knee length coat. Gideon had always fancied himself as a character from an old cowboy movie, playing poker in saloons around the old West. The Masquerade Ball being given by the Governor of the Ceti Gamma III colony gave him just the excuse he needed to indulge his fantasies.

His wife's fantasies had taken her in a rather different direction. Deborah was now dressed as an Amazon Warrior Queen, or at least the interpretation of that costume given in a late 20th century TV series. The black leather clung to the few parts of her body it covered, and emphasized those parts it left naked.

As Deborah rose and flowed into Gideon's arms, he whispered in her ear, "It's a damned good job these pants are made of leather, or everyone would be able to see that the Captain's main gun is on line again."

Deborah gave a low, sultry laugh, and moved her mouth to her husband's ear, licking it gently as she whispered back, "We have a little time to spare. How about that ride, cowboy?"

Gideon slid his hand under the short leather skirt his wife wore, tugging at her panties as he spun her around and pinned her back to the wall.

"Your wish is my command, oh Queen."

Sitting next to her husband on the bullet car, heading for the landing bay where the shuttle waited to take them down to the planet below, Demon let out a small sigh of contentment. Although she didn't usually like parties, she was quite looking forward to this one. The Governor and his wife had joined them for dinner on the Excalibur the previous evening, and Demon had found she liked them very much. They were intelligent, interesting and funny, showing few of the less desirable characteristics so often displayed by politicians. They had been delighted that the annual Governor's Masquerade Ball had coincided with the Excalibur's visit for re-supply, and had insisted that the senior crew attend, with their partners.

The Governor's wife, Bette, had been particularly helpful in finding appropriate costumes for everyone, and Demon smiled when she remembered what her sisters had chosen to wear. She could hardly wait to see Matthew's reaction when he saw Angel and Lily. Despite having been fired so recently, it was quite possible that the Captain's main gun would come roaring back into action.

Demon leaned against her husband's side, and turned to kiss his cheek, reveling in the feel of his hand against the bare skin of her waist, as they sat side by side on the bullet car.

Matthew turned to look at her and smiled quizzically, asking, "What was that for?"

Demon smiled, "It was for the sexiest, hottest man on the ship, that's what it was for. I do love you in those clothes, although I have this almost overwhelming desire to rip them off you."

Matthew laughed and pulled her closer against his side, turning to kiss her thoroughly. When they finally broke for air, the car was pulling to a halt. Matthew pulled Demon to her feet and gave her one last hug, shaking his head as he said, "No ripping. I think all this leather is too tough for that, anyway. We'll have to restrict ourselves to stripping, not ripping."

Demon laughed seductively, and holding onto Matthew's hand tightly, exited the bullet car.

Gideon strode through the doors of the landing bay, starting to laugh as soon as he saw the costume his XO was wearing. To complement Deborah's outfit, John Matheson had chosen a costume from the same 20th century TV series. To give him his due, Gideon had to admit to himself that John's tiny beard and moustache actually suited him, but nevertheless the Captain couldn't help teasing.

"What's this, John? Baring your chest for the ladies?" Gideon grinned as he waved his hand at where John's shirt and red suede tunic were open almost to the waist.

John drew himself up in mock indignation and pulled his shirt and tunic together. "I am Autolycus, King of Thieves. Watch your language, vassal, or I'll steal your Queen." The Commander bowed low over Deborah's hand and kissed it gallantly, then pulled her close to his side and stole a quick kiss.

Deborah chuckled and slid out of John's grasp, returning to her husband's side. "Watch it, Autolycus. This Queen's heart was stolen long ago." She looked up at Gideon and smiled, then closed her eyes and tilted her head back, demanding another kiss.

The Captain obliged her, then turned to his XO. "Where are the others? We should be leaving soon." A flash of movement in the corner of his eye attracted Gideon's attention, and he turned to watch Angel walking through the open doors. After a few moments, he remembered to breathe again, and became aware that the zipper on his pants was being put under considerable strain.

Angel's dress was positively modest, covering her from her breasts to the floor in a white filmy material with a long train behind, but the combination of bare shoulders, generous cleavage, and the tight fitting bodice, set Gideon's pulse racing. The mischievous smile Angel gave him made him realize she was well aware of the impact she was having on him.

"Captain." Angel bobbed a curtsy, giving Gideon a view of her cleavage that he could really have done without at that moment. "Do you like my costume? I'm Scarlett O'Hara tonight. Can I play with your pistol?"

After licking his unaccountably dry lips a few times, Gideon managed a polite response, ignoring her last teasing enquiry. "It's a very nice costume. Good to see you up and about, Angel. After that tumble you took earlier, we were worried you might not be able to join us."



Angel had been helping unload Medbay supplies when she had tripped and fallen heavily. The raven haired beauty smiled coquettishly up at the Captain and lifted her skirt to her thigh as she said, "Oh no, Captain, I'm fine now. Look, all the bruising has gone since I used the regenerator."

Gideon's breathing became a little ragged, and his crotch was aching, as he took in the expanse of leg displayed in front of him. Any higher and Angel would have been flashing her panties. [If she's wearing any.] That thought was enough to make the zipper of his pants creak under the strain, so Gideon dragged his eyes back to her face, licked his lips again, and choked out, "Excellent. Glad you're fully recovered." Turning to John he asked, "Now, where are Luke and Lily?"

"We're here!" Lily's voice came from the doorway, and Gideon turned to look at her and Luke as they entered the landing bay. Well, he looked at Lily. Later he admitted to himself that he had barely been aware that Luke had been at her side.

Demon watched with some amusement as her husband took in her littlest sister's outfit. Like Angel's, it was actually quite modest, but also like Angel's, it emphasized all the best features of the wearer.

It was a warm chocolate brown, with detailed embroidery around the low cut, square neckline and down one side of the skirt. The sleeves were wide, and Lily carried a small chatelaine fastened to her belt. Pearl necklaces drew attention to the swelling of her breasts, and her headdress framed her delicate features.

Luke stood proudly by Lily's side, looking down fondly at his flamboyant partner, smiling indulgently. He was dressed in blue, in a costume from the same historical period as Lily's, and he filled a pair of tights better than Demon might have expected. [Luke has a fine pair of legs on him.] Demon thought, trying not to think of Matthew's legs--long, lean, sexy legs, currently clad in leather--and failing miserably.

Matthew's arm tightened around Demon's waist, his hand gently stroking the bare skin of her belly as he said, "Time to party, people." He turned as Christina Jackson entered the landing bay, smiling as he said, "Leave the lights on, Lieutenant. We could be back late."

Jackson nodded and smiled back. "Have a good time. Don't worry about the ship or the children, I'll baby-sit them all tonight."

Demon laughed and sent a wave of affection through her link to her two year old son, currently playing in the Medbay crèche with his cousins. *[[Be good, Marcus, and play nicely with Faylinn and Dasha.]]*

Marcus sent a wave of love back, with a mumbled, *[[I'm very good. I let Dasha play with Half-Ted.]]*

Demon told her son to let Faylinn play with his toy, too, which produced a sub-vocal grumbling. Marcus would have preferred to have Dasha all to himself, and often tried to exclude his female cousin from their games. Demon knew this behavior stemmed from jealousy at his cousins' closeness, from

which Marcus sometimes felt excluded. Telling him again to play nicely, Demon sent one last wave of love to her son, then turned and smiled at Matthew.

"Shall we go?"

Luke let out a low soft whistle as their ground transport drew up to the gates of the Governor's residence. 'Castle' would have been a better description. The huge building was reminiscent of castles built along the Rhine valley on Earth. It was a confection of turrets and balconies, high towers and mock battlements, looking more like something from a fairy tale than any real residence had a right to look.

Illuminated by spotlights in the courtyard, the castle stood out bright white against the darkness of the night. It was isolated from the main settlement of the planet, and was built on the edge of a precipice, which surrounded the castle on three sides. The only entrance was through gates in a high wall on the remaining side.

John Matheson laughed softly at Luke's reaction, murmuring in his ear so the driver couldn't hear them, "It got built during a revival of 19th century German architecture. Gingerbread kitsch. Incredible, isn't it?"

Luke could only agree. "It looks like the Sleeping Beauty's castle on Disneyplanet. I'm half expecting a fire breathing dragon to appear out of the moat!"

John smiled and assured the doctor that there were no dragons on Ceti Gamma III. "Unless Alwyn has been around recently."

The transport pulled up to the gates, and the side of the vehicle opened upwards to allow the passengers to exit. Luke helped Lily gather her skirts and step down from the vehicle, winking at her as he quoted, "Now, by the world, it is a lusty wench!"

Lily stuck her tongue out at him, saying "Watch it, or I'll 'comb your noddle with a three-legg'd stool'. Well, I will if I can find one, anyway."

Luke laughed and kissed her quickly, watching while John helped Angel out of the transport. Gideon jumped out next, and spun around to grab Demon around the waist and swing her down, giving her a quick kiss as he did so. Luke smiled to himself, knowing that moving so quickly was the only way the Captain could ever get his wife to accept help. She was fiercely independent, as her choice of costume indicated.



The three couples moved to the gates, which swung open in front of them to reveal a very practical looking set of security equipment. This was no fairytale fantasy set-up, but a sophisticated high tech screening system, necessitated by some low level civil unrest in the run up to the colony's impending independence from Earth.

Gideon led the way, and presented his hand to the scanner held out by the security officer. It scanned his palm print, then let out an abrupt burp of sound. The security officer shook his head, gave an exasperated sigh, and banged the scanner hard against the wall.

"Stupid machine has been messed up since I got on duty half an hour ago. It's trying to tell me you're already here." He grinned up at Gideon, saying, "Welcome to Ceti Gamma III, Captain Gideon. I had family on Earth, so like many others on this planet, I have a lot to thank you for."

Luke watched as Gideon blushed slightly, still uncomfortable with receiving such comments, although after all this time Luke thought he would have become used to them. The Captain muttered something about only doing his job, then Demon stepped forward to place her hand on the scanner, effectively distracting the guard's attention away from her husband. The security officer's eyes nearly disappeared down the tall blonde's cleavage, so he never saw the less than enthusiastic expression on her face as the scanner flashed green. Demon removed her hand and stepped to one side, to allow the others their turn.

As she did so, the guard cleared his throat and choked out, "Sorry, Ma'am, I can't let you take that knife into the party." He was pointing at the weapon Demon carried on her hip, but his gaze was still firmly glued to her breasts.

Demon looked down in surprise, then back at the guard. She smiled gently, although it was wasted on him, as he never lifted his eyes far enough to see it. Pulling on the hilt of her 'dagger', Demon showed that there was no blade attached. It was a fake. "See? Just for show. Part of the costume."

The man managed to drag his gaze away from her breasts long enough to glance at the hilt, then nodded and waved her through, before turning to the rest of the party. He checked to make sure that the pistols carried by the Captain were also fakes, then scanned the others. By this time, the guard was trying to look in three directions at once, apparently unable to decide which woman to slobber over. Luke had to admit that it was a tough decision. While Demon was displaying her charms more openly, Lily and Angel had rarely looked more beautiful.

As they passed the guard on their way into the castle, Luke leaned across and whispered, "As a doctor, I have to tell you that it's not good for your eyes, trying to ogle in three directions at once like that."

The security officer grinned back, "Give me a break, Doc. It's not often a guy like me gets this close to such gorgeous women. I gotta take the breaks that come my way."

Luke laughed and followed the rest of his party into the entrance hall. It was as outrageous as the outside of the castle. At least three stories high, it had stairs running up on either side to the upper floors, and numerous chandeliers lighting the vast interior space, sparkling like diamonds as the crystals caught the light. Between the two curving staircases stood the Governor and his wife, waiting to greet their guests as they entered.

"Welcome to our world and to our home. Isn't it silly? One of the previous Governors got a little carried away."

Bette Donovan, the Governor's wife, rushed forward to meet her guests. Before they could respond to her greeting, she gushed, "I do love your costumes! I was quite concerned when the suppliers lost the one they'd originally set aside for you, Captain, but the duplicate they made is rather splendid, isn't it? I demand a dance from you later. It's the hostess's prerogative to dance with all the most handsome men." Gideon had opened his mouth to reply but before he could do so, Bette had spun around and started complimenting the others on their costumes.

Mike and Bette Donovan had been among the first wave of colonists of Ceti Gamma III, and were now in their late sixties. They had built a successful farm, and brought up a large family, all of whom were now settled on the planet in various occupations. Their eldest daughter was running their farm in conjunction with her own during the period of Mike's Governorship.

Donovan had been appointed to his position in line with Earth's policy for colonies approaching independence. Earth Gov had found it more effective to allow locals to manage the transition from colony to independent member of the Earth Alliance, offering the post of Governor to someone respected by the community, who also had the managerial skills required to maintain economic stability during the transfer of authority. Mike Donovan totally fitted this profile. A large man, with an expansive personality, his costume suited him perfectly. Dressed as Henry VIII of England, he exuded bonhomie and hospitality as he welcomed his guests.

Bette Donovan's ample figure had been squeezed into a dress from the same period. Unfortunately, her dress was in some ways similar to that worn by Lily, which only emphasized the differences in age, size and beauty between the two women. However, Gideon smiled fondly as he listened to Bette's vociferous admiration of Lily's costume. Any shortcomings in the Governor's wife's appearance were more than made up for by her kindness and good humor.

The Governor moved to Gideon's side and said quietly, "Don't bother trying to answer her. Once she's in full flow, she can't be interrupted. She'll wind down eventually. Just be thankful that *your* wife doesn't talk like that."

The Captain turned and smiled at the older man. "Deborah can talk the hind leg off a donkey when she's in the mood, but she tends to be quieter when there are a lot of people around. She's a little shy."

Mike Donovan's eyes widened as he looked across to where Deborah was listening to Bette admiring Angel's dress. "Shy? In an outfit like that? That wouldn't be the first word I'd think of."

Gideon laughed. "She looks pretty amazing, doesn't she?" He looked proudly at his wife, wondering yet again what he'd done to deserve her falling in love with him. To him, she was the most beautiful woman in the universe.



Just.

His eyes slid across to Angel, who had leaned forward to hook her fingers through the loop at the hem of her skirt, allowing her to lift the train from the floor. As the younger woman stooped, the swell of her breasts pressed against the filmy white material of her dress, and Gideon could see her nipples standing out with excitement and anticipation. A quick glance at the Governor showed that his eyes had strayed in the same direction.

The Captain leaned across and spoke quietly in Donovan's ear. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mike. She's young enough to be your daughter!" He grinned at the older man's startled look and slight flush.

"None of *my* daughters ever looked like that! Now why don't you take pity on a poor old man and

take these beautiful women where I can't see them, and remove the temptation. I'll catch you later. Just be warned. Don't let Bette catch up with you. She's a terrible dancer. She'll stamp all over your feet, then wonder why you're not smiling. You could end up crippled for days."

Gideon laughed. "I've been known to cripple a few partners myself, and I'll return the favor of a warning. You might want to avoid dancing with Deborah. She's not exactly light on her feet, either."

Donovan grinned back. "But holding her in my arms might be worth a few broken toes."

Gideon laughed. "Hands off, Henry. You may have had six wives in a previous life, but I don't intend to let you add *mine* to your list." He moved to stand by Deborah's side, sliding his arm around her waist, resting his hand on the soft, warm, bare skin that her costume left exposed. Deborah turned her head and smiled up into his eyes. Her expression of love and passion sent a surge of warmth flowing through Gideon, and a sense of pride and joy. He knew she would never look at anyone else in that way.

Bette Donovan waved imperiously at a table to one side of the staircase. "Masks! You must all collect your masks and wear them until midnight. Don't forget and no peeking before then!"

Urging the party from the Excalibur to climb the stairs to the ballroom, Bette turned to greet her next guests, as effusive and welcoming as ever.

John studied the narrow black mask he held. "If I put this on, I'll look more like Zorro than Autolycus," he protested.

Lily stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, whispering, "I've always had a little fantasy about Zorro climbing into my bedroom and my bed. Maybe we can play it out later?" Her emerald green eyes sparkled with mischief, and John was glad that his tunic was long enough to cover his groin. Fortunately, his leather pants could also conceal his reaction to his partner's words.

He turned to Luke and said laughingly, "Hey, Petruchio! Get this wench under control, will you?"

Before Luke could answer, Lily stuck her tongue out, put her hands on her hips and quoted, "Your betters have endur'd me say my mind, And if you cannot, best you stop your ears." Her stance, her dress, her beauty, which even the black mask she had fastened across her face didn't conceal, totally enchanted John.

He laughed again. "Oh, I can see we're going to have trouble with you tonight! Maybe having you dress as Katharina from 'The Taming of the Shrew' wasn't such a good idea after all." As an aside to Luke, he said, "She could become unbearable before the night's out."

Quick as a flash, Lily retorted, "Asses are made to bear, and so are you."

Luke stepped quickly to Lily's side, and pulled her close, grinning at John as he put his hand gently over Lily's mouth and quoted, "I am he born to tame you, Kate; And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate Conformable as other household Kates."



A spurt of laughter from his other side made John turn, to find Angel grinning at him. "If you believe you'll ever tame *this* Kate, you really are in fantasy land!"

A cry from Luke drew John's attention back to his partners, and he saw that Luke had now removed his hand from Lily's mouth and was rubbing it, while Lily had a wicked smile on her face as she said, "If I be waspish, best beware my sting."

Angel laughed again, her bright blue eyes sparkling behind her mask as she said, "OK, enough of the quotes and banter. I want to dance! Scarlett will only accept the best dancer in the room, and that's you, Commander Matheson." John tried to protest, but Angel was having none of it. "Put that mask on, and get up those stairs, mister! Scarlett wants to dance."

John laughed and bowed deeply, then straightened and put on his mask, offering his arm to Angel, to lead her up the stairs to the ballroom above

Demon smiled as she followed the others up the staircase, her arm around Matthew's waist, as his was around hers. The touch of his hand on her bare skin was enough to send little flutters of excitement through the tall blonde, but she suppressed her eternal lust for her husband, as she smiled and said quietly, "Lily and Angel are really looking forward to this ball, especially Angel. Did you see the way she almost bounced up the staircase? And Lily is just as bad. They both look so beautiful tonight, I'm sure they'll be in demand for every dance."

Matthew laughed and turned his head to look at his wife. His warm golden eyes showed through the holes in his mask, and they glowed with passion as he whispered, "They're not the only beautiful women around here, you know. You could be very much in demand yourself."

Demon snorted. "Ha! When the local males get an eyeful of those two, they won't even notice I'm here."

Matthew paused in their ascent, turning to face his wife and letting the others pull ahead of them, as he looked at Demon quizzically. "You really believe that, don't you?"

Demon nodded. "I know I have a decent body, and my face doesn't stop clocks, but I'm not in their league. Angel and Lily are both much prettier than I am. I've always known that. It doesn't bother me. I've never been that interested in how I look. All I really care about is that you like what you see."

Matthew stared silently at her for a moment, then lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it gently. "The word 'like' doesn't really cover it. You're very beautiful, and you're the only person in the galaxy who doesn't know it. Every man in this place is jealous as hell that they're not standing where I am. Every man here would love to hold you in his arms, and kiss you, but only I can." He leaned forward and gently kissed her lips.

Tears sprang into Demon's eyes as she sensed her husband's total sincerity. He really believed what he'd just said. Swallowing a lump in her throat, she whispered, "I don't care what any other man here thinks or wants. If you think I'm beautiful, that's all that matters. Now, there's someone up there who's waving at us, and I don't know him, so I guess he must be trying to attract your attention."

Demon took the opportunity of Matthew's distraction to lift her mask and wipe her eyes quickly, then followed him to the top of the staircase, holding his hand tightly.

"Well, well, well. Danielius Kolisovas. Long time no see." Gideon grinned at the man dressed as a pirate, complete with skull and crossbones on the hat he wore above the red bandanna wrapped around his head. He was instantly recognizable, despite his eye-patch, from his dimpled square jaw, and long, prominent nose.



The Lithuanian had served aboard the Agamemnon with Gideon, but he had retired several years before, and set up his own commercial transport company. Starting with one beaten up old space ship, Kolisovas had built his company into one of the more successful cargo shipping lines. Most of his business had been based out in the colonies, so he hadn't been too badly hit when the embargo on Earth had been in force. Gideon had seen his old colleague's name in the financial media a few times, and knew he had prospered.

"I see you decided not to bother with a costume, and you're showing your true colors at last." Gideon grinned at the pirate.

Kolisovas roared with laughter and slapped Gideon on the back. Hard. "I could say the same for you, Matt. You always were a bit of a cowboy. Now introduce me to this lovely lady, why don't you? Then I can take her away from you, just like I used to do with all your women."

Gideon smiled and introduced Deborah, watching Danny's face flush as he realized that this wasn't just 'another woman', but was actually his old friend's wife. The pirate blustered a little, demanding to know why he hadn't been invited to the wedding, and why he hadn't heard about the happy event since. Gideon decided to let his old friend off the hook.

"You know the answer to that, Danny. I was scared you'd take her away from me. I wasn't willing to risk that with Deborah." He watched as Danny looked at Deborah appreciatively, then the pirate leaned forward to take her hand and kiss it gallantly.

"Entirely understandable, Matt. If I'd set eyes on her first, I wouldn't want to lose her, either."

Deborah flushed slightly at the compliment, then withdrew her hand gently, smiling as she said, "It's always a pleasure to meet an old friend of Matthew's, Mr. Kolisovas. What brings you to Ceti Gamma III?" Her tone was politely inquiring, and Gideon could see from Danny's expression that his old friend felt gauche and awkward in the face of such exquisite manners. He wasn't the first man to feel that way. Gideon couldn't quite understand how Deborah managed to come across as an aloof, aristocratic, English lady, when she was dressed only in a black leather mini-skirt and bra, but somehow she did.

Danny explained that he had brought in some of the supplies that the Excalibur was now taking on board, then went on, a little sheepishly, "I'm not sure if I should mention this, Matt, but there's one hell of a poker game starting up in a room down the hall. As soon as I saw you, I wondered..." he trailed off, his eyes darting sideways, trying to watch Deborah's reaction.

Deborah maintained her polite, smiling expression as she leaned toward Gideon, kissing his cheek and

saying quietly, "If you want to go play, don't worry about me. I'll join the others and watch the dancing for a while. Then I'll hit the buffet. If the food is as good as Bette promised, you may need a crane to get me back up the ramp to the shuttle."

Gideon laughed and hugged her tightly, running his hands down her bare back, and kissing her passionately. When he released her, he gazed into her amber eyes and smiled. "You are a damned understanding woman. I don't deserve you, so pig out all you like. Just try not to burst out of your costume. That could be embarrassing."

With a gentle laugh, and a friendly pat on her husband's butt, Deborah left Gideon and Kolisovas standing at the top of the stairs, both watching the sway of her slender hips as she walked away.

Danny whistled softly. "Hubba, hubba! Where in hell did you find her, Matt? She's gorgeous! Does she have any sisters?"

Gideon laughed. "Yes, she does. But not for the likes of you. Now where's this hot game of yours?"

Demon walked away with a gentle smile on her lips, swaying her hips, well aware of her husband's appreciative gaze, and sensing Kolisovas' admiration and envy of his friend's good fortune.

Entering the ballroom, she stopped abruptly in the doorway, and her mouth fell open in wonder. This room surpassed even the previous excesses of the palace. It was easily fifty meters on each side, and rose into a dome above. Hanging from the center was a chandelier that put those in the entrance hall to shame. It was decorated with Chinese and dragon motifs, and Demon estimated that the whole thing was at least ten meters high. Only the enormous height of the dome made it possible to hang such a monstrosity in the room.



The dome itself was decorated in scales of gold, overlapping and reflecting the light from the chandelier. Demon whistled softly to herself, and moved further into the room as she became aware of others entering behind her. Two sides of the room consisted of a series of French windows, each of which led onto a balcony. A quick check of those windows made Demon shudder. The balconies projected out over the deep chasm surrounding the castle. Only the central balcony was large enough for her to consider venturing onto. Demon was not fond of heights.

Turning her gaze back into the room, Demon could see her sisters dancing. As she watched, the first dance ended, and John bowed deeply to Angel, making her laugh with glee. The tall blonde didn't need to be able to read her sister's feelings to know how happy she was. It showed in the glow of her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. Angel was having fun.

Luke and Lily had stopped beside John and Angel, and the two men quickly changed places, cutting in before any of the locals got chance to ask either of the two women to dance. Demon could see and feel the disappointment of the surrounding men. At least six of them had been watching avidly for a chance to cut in on Angel and Lily. [They'll just have to wait their turn,] Demon smiled to herself.

She watched the dancing for a while, politely declining several suitors, explaining that she didn't dance, and then she made her way slowly around the outside of the room. More people had entered behind her and the room was slowly filling, with more couples joining the dancers on the floor with every passing

moment. The room was becoming hotter, the music louder, and the press of people greater. Demon carefully blocked all the emotions of the people around her, but it became more difficult as the numbers and the crowd grew.

When the next dance ended, the locals finally got their chance. John and Luke stepped aside, and there was a rush to see who could ask Angel and Lily to dance first. In the scramble that followed, Demon sent to her sisters, *[[You should have brought dance cards! Then you could write down all their names and keep your beaux in order.]]*

Lily laughed back through their link, while Angel blew a raspberry at her older sister. *[[What makes you think I can't keep track of them all without a card? We're not all as old and senile as you, darling Demon.]]*

Demon nearly laughed out loud at the mental image of Angel sticking her tongue out that accompanied the thought. *[[Well, this senile old woman is finding it a little stuffy in here. I'm going to get some air, and get away from these pests who won't take 'no' for an answer. Have fun!]]*

Her sisters both sent back, *[[We will!]]*

Demon waved at John and Luke, who had both asked local ladies to dance, and slid through the French windows onto the largest balcony. Standing with her back to the wall, she checked the depth of the balcony and the height of the balustrade, before moving away from the door. If she stayed at the back of the balcony, and away from the outer edge, she decided she'd be fine.

Finding a bench conveniently placed against the wall, Demon lowered herself gratefully, and leaned back, staring at the stars, enjoying the warmth and peace of the night. The music could still be heard through the glass of the windows, but it was muffled, and she was no longer surrounded by people and their emotions. With a sigh of contentment, Demon settled down to enjoy her solitude.

Angel couldn't remember the last time she'd had so much fun. She and Lily were the belles of the ball, with a long line of men waiting for the favor of their attention. John was definitely the best dancer so far, but some of her other partners had been pretty good. Angel enjoyed nothing more than dancing with a man who knew how to move and how to lead. The feeling of a strong hand, firmly placed at the base of her spine, subtly signaling their moves, was heaven on earth. She felt as if she was floating on air, and she was almost drunk with happiness. The open admiration of so many men was a heady cocktail.

Her current partner was a tall, handsome young man, who seemed a little overawed by this beauty having agreed to dance with him. He wasn't a bad dancer, but his shyness prevented him from leading as positively as Angel would have liked. She had tried to make conversation with him, but he quickly became tongue-tied and blushed furiously as he tripped over his words. Angel decided it would be kinder to leave him be, and just enjoy the dance.

The lack of conversation meant that Angel could allow her attention to wander a little, and watch what was going on elsewhere in the room. Demon hadn't returned from the balcony, and Angel wondered where the Captain was. She hoped he hadn't got called back to the ship for some reason. *[No, Demon would have told us. He must have been held up somewhere.]*

A flash of brown flowing skirts caught Angel's attention, just as Lily's voice sounded in her head.

[[We're going next door for a cool drink, do you want to join us?]]

Angel looked around to see Lily standing in the doorway to the dining room, with Luke and John either side of her. She sent back, *[[No, I'm fine. I don't want to abandon the poor boy half way through his dance. I'll catch up with you in a little while.]]*

Lily waved, then she and her partners disappeared through the doorway. Angel turned her attention back to her dance partner and again tried to make conversation. After a few mumbled responses, she gave up, and resigned herself to completing the dance in silence.

The music came to a halt, and the young man bowed hurriedly, then fled, leaving Angel smiling bemusedly in the middle of the dance floor. Before she could look for her next partner, a firm hand descended on her shoulder, and she was spun around. The music started at the same moment, and Angel found herself being led firmly into the next dance. She smiled up into the masked face of her new partner, saying, "I'd wondered where you'd got to, Captain. You know, I'm already taken for this dance."

His lips curved into a smile, and Angel's heart did a back flip. This was still the sexiest man she had ever known. *[Except one...]* She suppressed the thought ruthlessly. In the clothes he wore for the ball, Gideon looked exciting and dangerous, and Angel had felt herself getting wet and warm when she had first seen him in the landing bay. She'd covered her excitement by teasing him, but it didn't stop her wanting him as she'd wanted no other man. *[Except one...]*

The wayward thought was pushed aside again, as he leaned forward to whisper in response to her words, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." His use of a soft southern accent sent a shiver down Angel's spine, but she laughed at his quote, so appropriate for her costume.

Deciding that if the Captain wanted to flirt, she would match him, Angel looked up into his dark, golden eyes, half-hidden behind the mask, fluttering her eyelashes as she said, "Just watch out for my toes. I've seen you dance before, remember."

His lips curved again, but this time the expression wasn't so familiar. It could almost have been a sneer. Before Angel could be sure, he leaned forward again, his breath hot against her ear as he whispered, "I'll do what the hell I like with those toes, darlin'. They're mine, remember. That was the deal. Body and Soul."

Angel froze. She was sure her heart had stopped beating, and she had no idea how she didn't faint. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't catch her breath. She wanted to run, but her legs wouldn't move. She wanted to throw him away from her, but as always when in emotional turmoil, her telekinetic powers deserted her. She could only say a single word. The word that still terrified and excited her. The word she still cried out in the night, when she dreamed of his body pressed against hers.

"Lucas."

Her knees started to give way under her, and Angel became aware that Lucas was holding her up, half-carrying her as he maneuvered them toward one of the French windows. Something hard and metallic pressed into her shoulder as he moved her, holding her tightly against him. It was a Sheriff's badge, the points of the star digging into Angel's soft flesh. She cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. The Captain hadn't worn such a badge, but it was typical of Lucas to do so. His breath came hot on her ear again, as he murmured. "Don't faint. You don't want to cause a scene, now, do you?"

Angel wasn't sure what she wanted anymore. Lucas' arms were around her. She could smell his distinctive, spicy aroma, the smell that had always driven her wild with desire. She wanted to run for her life, and she wanted to stay in this man's arms forever. She wanted to stay in the room with the crowd, and she wanted to be alone with him again. But the thing she wanted most was him. Lucas. The man she'd never stopped wanting and loving.

Before she really knew what was happening, Lucas had steered her through one of the doors onto a deserted balcony. When she realized they were alone, Angel started to panic. This was Lucas. The man she'd betrayed, the man who would want to kill her for that betrayal. She'd just let him bring her out onto an empty balcony, above a deep chasm. Unless she could find a way out of this, Angel decided her life expectancy could be counted in minutes.

Lucas' arms still held her close, pressing her tightly against his chest as he gazed down at her silently. He seemed to be studying her intently, then he moved his hand and released the mask from her face, pressing Angel's back against the wall so she couldn't escape. She tried to call through her link to her sisters, but as she did so, she could see Lucas' mouth curl into another smile. "Not a chance. I've got you blocked."

Angel was terrified and she started to struggle against his grip, but he only held her more tightly, whispering, "There's no running from me, love," as he almost crushed her between his body and the wall.

The frightened girl drew in her breath to scream, but before she could do so, Lucas' mouth descended over hers. He forced her lips open, and his tongue invaded her mouth. The kiss was hard, passionate, and all the memories of how Lucas kissed came rushing back to Angel, as she felt herself start to melt inside. She couldn't help responding, her tongue dueling with his, as she savored the taste of him.

His taste, his smell, the feeling of his arms crushing her, his hands wandering around her body, stroking her, touching her, arousing her, like no other man ever had or could, sent Angel spiraling down into a quagmire of sensuality. Every nerve ending was aflame, as Lucas used all his knowledge of her body to excite her. Angel was lost. Fallen under Lucas' spell again.

She knew she should scream, run, flee for her life, but under this assault on her senses, Angel was helpless. Lucas could do whatever he wanted with her, and she was powerless to stop him. Her legs started to tremble again as the kiss seemed to go on forever, draining her of all strength, and she thought she might collapse, but Lucas held her up, and finally broke away.

Angel was gasping for air, but as usual, Lucas showed little sign of exertion. His cold, amber eyes stared down at her through his mask, and his lips curled again into a superior smile as he said, "You still know how to kiss, Angel-face, I'll give you that."

He bent his head forward, and was about to kiss her again, when Angel summoned a strength she didn't know she possessed, and pushed him back a little. Not much. She was still trapped between the wall and his hard body, his hips pressing against hers, making her aware that he had become aroused during their kiss.

"What do you want, Lucas? Why have you come here?" Angel managed to gasp out the words, but her body was betraying her, trying to mold itself to his. She couldn't help lifting her hands to pull off his hat, and running her hands through his soft, silky hair.

"I want you, Angel-face." His mouth settled over hers again, and this time Angel was sure she was going to faint. His hands did things to her body, lifting her dress, finding their way between her legs, which opened for him without her volition. Lucas broke the kiss to grin down at her, as his fingers slid between her soft folds, causing her to gasp with pleasure as he found her clit and began to stroke it gently. "That's my Angel. Never wears her panties to a party. Were you hoping for a quick fuck tonight, darlin'? From one of the local yokels? I thought you had better taste than that."

Angel raised her hand to hit him, but Lucas intercepted her, holding her wrist high in the air as he gazed down at her. His other hand never stopped fingering her, sliding in out and out of her, arousing her more every moment. Angel closed her eyes, and tears slid down her cheeks as she whispered, "You bastard, Lucas. Why do you do this? Why do you want to hurt me so much?"

Lucas released her wrist and moved his hand to wipe the tears from her cheek. "Why did you want to hurt me, Angel? I still have the scar on my back from Dureena's knife. It might as well have been your hand that drove the knife home. You betrayed me, Angel."

Angel groaned with pain and pleasure as he continued to arouse her, gasping, "You were going to kill my sister! I couldn't let you do that. I'd have done anything for you, anything you asked, Lucas, but not that. Not my sister." She broke down and sobbed, leaning her head against the rough material of his jacket, clinging to his shoulders for support as she wept.

Lucas pulled his hand from between Angel's legs, and held her tightly in his arms. He said nothing, just held her and stroked her hair as she wept. Angel could hardly believe it when she felt the soft touch of his lips on her forehead. She sniffed back another sob, and looked up to see him staring down at her, his expression unreadable.

Half choking out the words, Angel gasped, "So what happens now, Lucas? Do you throw me over the edge of the balcony? Is this where it all ends?"

Lucas lifted his hand and again wiped the tears from her cheek. His mouth formed a single word, although he said it so softly, Angel could hardly hear him. "No."

He gazed down at her in silence for a while, then sighed. "I pushed you too hard, Angel. That stupid test. That was my mistake. But you still betrayed me, and one day you'll have to pay for that. Not today, but one day."

With those words, he pulled Angel back into his arms, and kissed her again. The kiss was more intense, more passionate than anything Angel had ever experienced. She fainted.

Lucas lowered Angel gently onto a bench, then straightened, adjusting his pants to ease the pressure on his swollen cock. He half-smiled to himself. No one in the galaxy could arouse him like his Angel. He wished he had the time to make love to her properly. Even unconscious, Angel was more of a woman, more exciting, than any other woman Lucas had ever met. But there was no time.

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead gently, then rested his hand over her belly for a moment, before he shook his head and whispered, "Not yet, Angel-face. One day, but not yet."

Straightening again, Lucas carefully pulled Angel's skirts down to cover her legs and sighed. He really didn't want to leave her like this, but he had other things to do, and every moment he spent in this

place increased the risk of detection.

Finding out about the ball, stealing the Captain's costume, and working his way into the palace despite the security, had all been easy compared to setting up the poker game to divert Captain Giddy-up. Lucas wasn't sure how long his local contacts would be able to keep the Captain distracted, and there was one more person Lucas wanted to see before he left.

Bending over Angel's unconscious body, Lucas gave her one last, slow kiss, savoring the taste of honey that always lingered on her lips. Then he disappeared back through the door into the ballroom, moving so fast that he seemed to teleport.

Demon leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, knowing that she should return to the ballroom, but reluctant to move. She had been sitting on the balcony for an hour, and during that time, only one person had stuck their head through the door, asking her if she'd seen someone she'd never heard of, then ducking back inside.

The muffled music she could hear through the doors, the balmy breeze, the brightness of the stars overhead, but most of all the solitude, made Demon loath to go back inside. She had carefully blocked off the emotions of the people in the castle since settling on the balcony, and she had allowed herself to recall the times she'd spent on her terrace on Eriadne. She had remembered a time before the crew of the Excalibur had arrived at her home, before she'd met her husband, before she'd become a wife and mother. While Demon wouldn't have turned back the clock for anything, she sometimes missed the peace and quiet of those times. The opportunity to experience that tranquility again, even for a short while, had been irresistible.

[Just another few minutes, then I'll go back inside,] Demon told herself, keeping her eyes closed and breathing the temperate air deep into her lungs. Fresh air. Not recycled by the Excalibur's pumps and scrubbers, but cool and clean, unpolluted and untainted. A rare treat for a woman who lived on a starship.

Gradually, she became aware that she was no longer alone. She hadn't heard the door open, nor had the music got louder, but Demon sensed another person standing in front of her. She opened her eyes and smiled up at the tall, dark figure, then rose from the bench as she said softly, "Hello. Has the game finished?"

The figure didn't speak or move, and a sense of dread stole over Demon. This wasn't her husband. It might look like him, and was even dressed like him, but this wasn't Matthew. She suddenly noticed a single difference in the man's costume. He wore a silver Sheriff's badge. Matthew hadn't worn anything like that. Extending her empathic powers for the first time since leaving the ballroom, Demon sensed the emotions of the man, and shuddered. There was none of Matthew's warmth, compassion and love, just an icy coldness, and anger. A rage that dominated all other feelings.

Demon opened her mouth to scream, but before she could do so, the man lunged forward, grabbed her and spun her around, pushing her backwards, at the same time as covering her mouth with his free hand. With no warning, Demon found herself bent backwards over the balustrade. Her mouth was covered, and fingers pinched her nose shut. She thought her back was going to break as he leaned over her, forcing her further and further out over the edge of the balcony. From the corner of one eye, Demon caught a glimpse of the chasm beneath, and all rational thought vanished. Her fear of heights overwhelmed her, and even her inability to breathe became meaningless in her terror of the abyss that

seemed to be sucking her down. Her mind and body froze in horror, as she descended into a dark pit of panic.

"Aw, hell." Lucas held up the limp form of the woman in his arms. He'd intended to frighten her, but not this much. He needed her conscious. And she wasn't exactly a lightweight, either. Unlike Angel, he couldn't just sweep her up into his arms, and carry her back across the balcony to the bench. This would take more effort.

"You could try losing a few pounds, Whiplash." He grunted with exertion as he half-carried, half-dragged her across to the bench, surprising himself by how gently he laid her onto it. Straightening and staring down at Demon's unconscious form, he had to admit that she still didn't carry any excess fat. Well, there were two prominent exceptions, wonderfully displayed by the costume she wore, but those could hardly be called excessive. Generous maybe, but not excessive. He enjoyed the view of Demon's breasts for a few seconds, then regretfully decided that he didn't have time to linger. He needed her awake.

Leaning forward, he grasped the flesh on the underside of her upper arm between his thumb and finger and twisted hard. The unconscious woman gave a gasp, and her eyelids flickered. [Nothing like a little pain to bring a body around.] Lucas thought with satisfaction, as he watched Demon rouse.

A few seconds later, the tall blonde opened her eyes wide, blinked, then tried to leap to her feet, but Lucas blocked her. "You're not going anywhere until I say so, Whiplash. If you try to scream, I'll toss you over the edge and be done with it. Now, are we going to talk, or do you want your first and last flying lesson?" Lucas watched as her eyes widened in fear. He hadn't realized Demon was afraid of heights, but now he knew that helpful little fact, he had no qualms about using it.

"What do you want?" The tall blonde lifted her chin, full of defiance. If her face hadn't been chalky white, Lucas might have thought she wasn't afraid of him or his intimidation, but her complexion gave her away. His threat had terrified her.

"Just to talk. We don't have long, as Angel will be coming around soon and..."

"Angel? What have you done to her? Where is she?" Demon interrupted him and again tried to push past him, but Lucas stopped her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Angel had a bit of a shock, but she's fine. I didn't hurt her. Well, not physically, anyway. That's the truth, Whiplash. You can believe it." Lucas put all his sincerity into his last words. Actually, it was the truth, but he wouldn't have sounded any less sincere if he'd lied.

Demon subsided and leaned back against the wall, waiting for Lucas to go on. Before he did so, he couldn't help himself saying, in an admiring tone, "You know, Whiplash, I do love that costume. You sure know how to dress to turn a man on. All that black leather and naked flesh. That's just how I always think of you."

The tall blonde sneered and spat back, "I'd rather you didn't think of me at all. If you want to talk, get on with it. Why are you here, and what do you want?"

Lucas could tell she was recovering from her terror and regaining control of herself. Demon in control was a dangerous woman, so he decided it was time to unsettle her again.

"I owe you. You may not know it, but I owe you a favor for what you did on Eriadne. You were kind when I was injured, and you brought my son to see me, so I owe you." Exactly what he owed her, Demon would find out later. She wouldn't like it. In the meantime, Lucas held up his hand to prevent her interrupting. "Let's not get into whose son he is. We both know when he was conceived and who was driving the car at the time. Marcus is my son, born of my genes, and one day I'll be coming for him, but as I said, I owe you. So I'm going to give you a choice. You don't have to make your mind up now, but you can think about it. When we meet again, you can tell me your decision."

Demon stared him straight in the eyes, not responding in any way to his words. Her defiance roused the rage in Lucas, increasing his enjoyment of what he had planned. After a few seconds of silence, he went on. "I need an heir. One day this body will die, and the spirit will need to move on. Marcus is that heir, but it doesn't have to be like that. You can choose for it to be different."

"How?" The tall blonde's face was frozen, her eyes full of hate as she spat the single word at him.

"Let me explain. I've been looking for a woman with the right body, mind and spirit to be the mother of my heir. In the time since Angel brought me back, I've only found two women with the right potential. You're one." Lucas watched Demon carefully, but her face didn't even flicker. He couldn't help but admire her self-control. Time to shake her to the core. "And Angel is the other."

As he expected, that got to her. "NO!" She almost screamed the word and leaped at him, hands extended, ready to fight. Lucas had to move fast to avoid being clawed, and he slid to one side, grabbing Demon and pushing her toward the balcony's edge.

Demon struggled wildly, but Lucas pushed her hard from behind, until she was again pressed between him and the balustrade, but this time she was facing outwards. She froze again. Lucas quickly looked around and saw that she had her eyes tightly shut. He whispered into her ear, "Don't fight me, and I'll take you back. Deal?"

The tall blonde nodded, eyes still clamped closed, so Lucas hauled her back, until she was again pressed against the wall of the castle. At least she hadn't tried to scream. She was probably too scared.

Lucas watched Demon in silence as she took a few deep breaths, then she slowly opened her eyes. "If you touch Angel again, I'll kill you, Lucas Buck. Someday, somehow, I'll kill you." Her voice was low and calm, full of steely determination.

Lucas laughed softly. "If that's how you want it, fine. Your choice. Give me my son, and I'll leave Angel alone." Now he was lying. Angel was his, and one day he planned to reclaim her. When he was ready.

"Never. Marcus isn't your son. He's mine and Matthew's, and I'll never give him to you. I'll never let you take him." Demon's voice didn't waver or shake.

Lucas nodded. "Then you can choose the third option. You can give me another heir. It won't take long, if you don't want it to. One quick fuck and you'll be done. Of course, if you want, I can make it a lot more fun than that, but if you want it short and not so sweet, I can do that, too. No heart or soul is fine with me. Then you can explain to your husband how you betrayed him and why you're carrying another man's child."

Demon's mind was racing. She was desperately trying to control herself, but she was struggling with the constant onslaught of physical and emotional fear to which Lucas was subjecting her. She still felt weak and sick from passing out in terror, when she'd thought he was going to throw her off the balcony. She'd thought she was going to pass out again when he'd pushed her back to the edge, and forced her to face that chasm again.

His threats of what he planned to do to Angel and Marcus were nearly enough to make her lose control completely, and she knew she couldn't afford to do that. If she screamed, called for help, or did anything to disturb him, Demon knew that Lucas was quite capable of killing her. For Angel's sake, for Marcus' sake, for Matthew's sake, she couldn't allow that to happen. She had to warn them, had to find a way to stop this monster from ruining their lives.

Pulling herself together, Demon glared defiantly into Lucas' handsome face, seeing the cruel coldness of his eyes through the mask he wore. "There's only one way you'll ever get me pregnant, Lucas. You'll have to rape me, and if you try, you may never walk without a limp again."

Lucas laughed. A cold, ruthless laugh that sent shivers through Demon's body.

"I told you before, Whiplash. I don't do rape any more. Producing an heir that way is too damned dangerous." He raised his hand and ran his thumb along Demon's cheek, duplicating a gesture Matthew often made, but while her husband's touch was full of love and affection, Demon could feel Lucas' sense of ownership, of possession, as he handled her.

She shuddered and Lucas dropped his hand, his eyes turning even colder, as he sensed her rejection. "If you want to spare your sister and your son, one day you'll beg me to do that. Don't piss me off, Demon. I can give pain just as easily as pleasure, and I'll leave it to you to imagine which I prefer."

Demon kept her face expressionless as she asked, softly, "Why do you hate us so much, Lucas? Why can't you just leave us alone? Why do you want to hurt us?"

For a moment, Demon thought she saw a flash of regret in his eyes, but then they turned cold as he sneered, "You don't know what real pain is. You should try being pierced through the heart by a bolt of energy and being sucked back into the hell of an Apocalypse Box, or maybe you'd like being stabbed in the back with a Zanderi hunting knife. Then you'd know pain." For a moment, the rage in him seemed to reign unchecked, but then he brought himself back under control, and went on, "I don't hate you, darlin'. It's just your bad luck that your sister released me from the Box, and you happen to have the right genes. Tough. You'll just have to learn to live with it."

As he spoke, Demon became aware of a pulling at her link with her sister. Angel was coming around. Lucas seemed to sense it at the same moment. He smiled and said, "Time for me to be out of here. Remember your choices, Whiplash. I'll be back."

Then he was gone. Demon wasn't sure how he moved so fast, and she could have sworn that the door to the ballroom hadn't opened, but he was gone. She lowered herself shakily to the bench and dropped her head into her hands, fighting back tears of fright, as the link in her mind came alive. Angel was wailing in fear, incoherent with panic. Demon tried to send soothing waves of calm through their link, but she was so badly shaken that her efforts were ineffectual.

After a few seconds, Lily's voice sounded in her head. *[[Demon? Where are you? I can't make sense of what Angel's saying. What's wrong with her?]]* Lily's mental voice was full of fear and anxiety.

Demon took another deep breath and sent, *[[I'm coming. I'll be there in a second.]]*

Pulling herself to her feet, Demon straightened her shoulders and told herself that she didn't have time to indulge in hysterics. That would have to wait. Her sisters needed her.

Gideon looked down at the cards on the table in front of him and smiled inwardly, not allowing a flicker of his satisfaction to show on his face. Three of his cards were face up, two face down. The ones on display were not promising. A Queen, an eight and a two. Nothing to bet on there. But the cards which were left face down on the table were another matter. Two more Queens rested there. Three of a kind. Three ladies, each one as beautiful as the ladies he'd brought to the ball.

All but one of the other players had dropped out of this hand a while back. Now it was between Gideon and the man sitting opposite, dressed in flowing Arab robes. The masks everyone wore made it difficult to read faces, but the Captain was sure this man would have given away nothing anyway. Glancing at the man's cards, Gideon ran some mental calculations.

Face up were a King, a Jack and a ten. It was a dangerous combination. If he had a Queen in the hole and a nine or an Ace, then Gideon's opponent had a straight, which would beat the Captain's three ladies. But the odds of him having the last Queen were low, so Gideon had kept raising the stakes. There were now forty thousand credits in the pot, and the stake stood at five thousand.

The Arab leaned back in his seat and sighed deeply. "I think it's time to call your bluff, cowboy. Let's see you." He tossed another pile of credits into the center of the table and waited.

Gideon allowed himself a slow smile as he flipped his two Queens over. The sound of the quick intake of breath from the other players was audible in the silence that followed. Gideon watched the Arab closely. Was he about to reveal a straight after all? The odds were against it, but the cards didn't always run in the Captain's favor.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, the Arab grumbled, "Dammit, I thought you were bluffing." He flipped over his own cards, revealing another King and Jack. Two pairs. Not enough to beat the Captain's ladies.

Gideon leaned forward, grinning as he swept the credits toward him. "I never bluff." He mentally crossed his fingers, and was glad Deborah wasn't around to make comments about his nose growing.

Pushing her way across the ballroom, Demon pulled herself together, and arrived at a decision. No one needed to know about her own encounter with Lucas. It wouldn't help the rest of her family to know that he had seen her and threatened her. It would only add to their distress. In fact, it would be best if none of the men found out that Lucas had been there at all. Demon could feel through their link that Angel was still half-fainting, hysterical and incoherent. Not surprising in the circumstances. If Demon could just get to her sister before she became rational, she might be able to prevent this whole nightmare getting worse.

As she tried to make her way through the crowd, the clock struck midnight and a great cheer went up around the room. Masks were being removed all around her, so Demon ripped hers off, too. Judicious use of her elbows cleared her path, and she finally arrived at the doors to the balcony where she knew

her sisters, John and Luke were gathered. Bracing herself for what awaited her, Demon took a deep breath and pushed the doors open.

It wasn't quite as bad as she'd expected. The balcony was quite large, with a solid wall around it. Angel half-sat, half-lay on a bench, sobbing hysterically into Lily's arms. John and Luke stood either side of the two women, looking worried but helpless. They both looked up as the tall blonde burst through the doors, and their relief at seeing her was palpable.

Demon ran to the bench and sat, quickly putting her arms around Angel and reinforcing Lily, trying to send soothing calm through their link. As she did so, she looked up and smiled sadly at the two men.

"Could you give us a moment, please? I think Lily and I can calm Angel better if there's just the three of us. I know you want to help, and I'm grateful, but could you just give us a moment to ourselves?" Demon had no idea where she found that calm, quiet tone of voice. Her own emotions were raging under the surface, barely under control, but somehow she managed to sound unperturbed. She was fairly sure that neither Luke nor John could have detected how very badly shaken she was. Even if they did pick up something, Demon hoped that they'd attribute it to her discomfort about being on the balcony. Her fear of heights was well known to her family.

Luke started to protest, saying that Angel might need his professional skills, but John put his hand on Luke's arm and hushed him. Staring hard at Demon, the telepath said quietly, "I'm sure Demon wouldn't ask us to leave if it weren't important." For a moment, Demon's conviction that she'd deceived John was shaken. Had he detected how badly upset she was?

John continued softly, "Do you want us to get Matt? When you've calmed Angel down, you might want to get back to the ship. If you like, I can let Matt know and organize the shuttle."

Demon smiled up at him gratefully. "Please. But don't let Matthew come out here, please. It will only make things more difficult. We'll meet you down in the entrance hall, as soon as Angel is fit to move. Lily will let you know when we're on our way."

All the time she'd been talking, Demon had been sending soft reassurances through her link to her sisters. Lily had been doing the same, but also following Demon's conversation with Luke and John. Demon knew that Lily was bursting with questions, but was holding back. Angel continued to sob, but her tears were abating, and Demon was desperate to see the men gone before Angel spoke.

John nodded, and with one more long look at Demon, he steered Luke, who was still mildly protesting, through the doors and off the balcony. As the doors swung shut behind them, Angel finally burst into coherent speech.

"Oh God, he was here! Lucas was here!"

Lily narrowed her eyes suspiciously, as Demon held Angel tightly and tried to calm her hysterical sister. The shock of Angel's announcement had left the little redhead reeling with fear and panic for a few moments, but now she had collected herself, and she knew something wasn't right. Demon wasn't surprised or shocked enough by Angel's news. Lily was convinced that somehow, Demon had known what Angel was going to say, and had deliberately engineered John and Luke's departure, before Angel could say it.

So how had Demon known? It was a good question, and Lily had every intention of asking it, as soon as Angel had stopped crying, and could tell them coherently what had happened. Demon was good at covering her emotions, but not that good. She should have shown some reaction to Angel's declaration, but the tall blonde's face hadn't even flickered. It was frozen into the controlled, icy look that Demon always wore when she was hiding her feelings.

Lily watched her sisters carefully, supporting them, wiping away Angel's tears with the material of her wide sleeve, waiting impatiently for the full story. It came out in sobs and hiccups, as Angel described her encounter with Lucas. How he had arrived on the dance floor and she had at first mistaken him for Matthew, but then realized how wrong she was, when she'd seen the Sheriff's badge he wore. How he had danced her out onto the balcony, kissed her, touched her, threatened her and comforted her. How she had fainted before he left, and she had no idea where he had gone.

Examining Angel's shoulder, Lily could see a dark bruise, where the Sheriff's badge had dug into her. Interestingly, there was a similar mark on Demon's breast, just above the leather of her costume. Another bruise stood out on the soft flesh inside Demon's upper arm. For a moment, Lily wondered where her older sister had got those marks, but then her attention was dragged back to the present by Angel.

"Oh God, Demon, he came back for me! He found me. You and Matthew said he'd never be able to get to me, that you'd protect me, but he found me! He could have killed me, but he didn't. He didn't want to kill me yet, he wants me to suffer, to live in fear, to always feel hunted. It's his revenge for the pain he suffered when I betrayed him, and for him living as a fugitive ever since. But one day, he's going to catch up with me again, and next time he'll kill me, I know he will! I just know it!"

Angel lost herself in fear and panic again, and started to sob hysterically. Lily took her raven haired sister into her arms and rocked her gently, looking up at Demon as she said, "We have to tell Matthew and John. They'll get the security people out looking for Lucas, maybe..."

Demon interrupted her. "No."

Lily looked up in surprise, continuing to hug Angel and stroke her hair as she sobbed. Demon was sitting rigidly upright on the bench, staring out into the night, her face a frozen mask as she went on, "We can't tell them, Lily. Lucas will be long gone by now. You know what he is and what he can do. He'd never allow himself to be captured. So what good would it be to tell our men that Lucas was here? They'll get upset and angry again, and all the memories of Dureena's loss and Angel's kidnapping will resurface. And for what? There's nothing we can do. He's gone. I don't think we'll see him again until he wants us to. And then..."

Demon's voice trailed off, and Lily looked at her quizzically, aware that Angel had stopped crying, and was also looking at their elder sister curiously.

"And then?" Lily prompted, trying to bring Demon back from whatever thoughts she'd lost herself in.

Demon shifted her gaze to her sisters, her face completely expressionless, and her voice flat as she said, "And then I'll kill him."

"No! You can't, you mustn't!" Angel whispered the words, and was horrified when she realized she'd said them aloud.

Demon and Lily both looked at her in astonishment. For the first time since arriving on the balcony, Demon's face showed some emotion, and Lily look stunned by Angel's words.

[[*Why not??*]] Both her sisters' voices sounded in Angel's head. She knew she had to answer them, never mind how ashamed she was of what she had to say.

Angel pulled herself together, trying to stay calm as she answered, [[*Because I still love him,*]] but she couldn't help crying as she thought it. She couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud, but they were true. She still loved Lucas. He was right; he still owned her, body and soul. Angel wondered if she would ever be free of him, but she feared it could never happen. Not until Lucas freed her.

What power was it that held her to Lucas? Angel had asked herself that question over and over again. He appeared in her sleep, he haunted her nightmares. She would wake, hot, sweaty, and yearning from dreams of him making love to her. No other man had made her feel how Lucas did. It had been over two years since he had touched her, yet it had only taken seconds for him to set her ablaze again. [Is it only lust I feel for him? I've lusted after Matt often enough, is it all wrapped up in that?]

Angel tried to tell herself that what she felt for Lucas was only desire. Naked sexual craving, sensual yearning, nothing more. But she knew she was lying to herself. Lucas had a hold on more than her body. He had captured her heart and her soul. It didn't matter that Angel knew he was evil, knew he was a killer, who wouldn't hesitate to murder her if it suited him. She loved him, and she couldn't stop.

Demon and Lily watched her in horrified silence. Angel knew they could never understand. Her sisters loved good men, kind men, men who loved them with both passion and affection. Their love for their partners warmed and sustained them. Angel's love for Lucas burned and destroyed. It hurt, it hungered, and it was never satisfied, except by the body of the man she loved. Her need for Lucas was beyond comprehension, but it was as real as her need to breathe.

Angel now knew that for the last two years she had been starving, famished for Lucas' presence, for his smell, his touch, his taste. And for just one moment, he had given her what she needed, himself, then he had snatched it all away again. The raven haired witch wondered how long she would have to go on starving before he returned, to feed her hunger, to hurt her, to burn her again. She knew that no matter how long it was, she would be like a moth drawn to the flame. No matter how hot the fire, no matter how painful, she would have to go close and be burned.

Demon took a deep breath and broke the silence. "We don't have to talk about that now. Do you agree that our men don't need to know about this? That it would be better for them *not* to know?"

Angel agreed wholeheartedly. The last thing she needed was Matt launching into a tirade of hatred for Lucas. She stopped crying, waiting for her little sister's response.

Lily looked troubled, saying, "But what will we tell them? How will we explain why Angel got so upset?" The little redhead hugged Angel tightly, showing her loving support for her sister.

Demon frowned for a moment, then her expression lightened. "We can say that Angel danced with someone who said something to upset her. Something that reminded her of Lucas. She had a flashback to when she was with Lucas, when he frightened her and threatened her. It was so vivid and real that she lost control. That should work."

Angel nodded vehemently. "I can go with that. It's even true as far as it goes."

Demon smiled faintly. "I know. It has to be, or I can't say it. I won't lie outright to Matthew."

Lily still looked troubled. "This is difficult, Demon. John, Luke and I don't keep secrets from each other. You're asking me to..."

Demon interrupted before Lily could finish. "I'm asking you to spare your partners from worry. This is something about which they can do nothing. Don't burden them unnecessarily."

Angel waited tensely. Would Lily agree? She must! The thought of how Matt, and even Luke and John, would react was something Angel didn't want to contemplate. She wished now that she'd been able to control herself when she'd first come around and found herself alone. But her fear and her panic had overwhelmed her, and Lily had picked up on it at once, rushing to Angel's side, bringing John and Luke with her.

Lily frowned, looking troubled, "I don't like this. I've never kept secrets from John and Luke. It would feel like a betrayal. I really don't think I can do this."

Angel could hear the irritation creeping into Demon's voice as she replied, "Then if you can't do it for their sake, do it for your sister. At least try to spare Angel the humiliation of having everyone know what had happened to her. Or don't you care how your sister feels?"

Lily's head came up and she hissed back at Demon, "How dare you..."

Angel interrupted before the little red-head could go on. "Please don't fight. Tonight has been bad enough; please don't make it worse by falling out over this. I wish I'd never come here, I wish I'd never heard of this place, I wish..." Angel's words broke down into sobs, and Demon immediately moved to comfort her.

Lily watched for a moment, obviously concerned at Angel's reaction, and she eventually nodded reluctantly. "OK. For the moment, I'll go along with this. But if we see or hear of any sign of Lucas again, then we tell them. No arguments, Demon. That's the deal. Take or leave it."

Angel shuddered at Lily's words. A deal. That was far too reminiscent of Lucas. She turned her attention to Demon, as her eldest sister nodded in return. "Agreed. Now, are you feeling well enough to leave, Angel? John will have told Matthew by now, and he'll be waiting, trying to be patient, but straining at the leash. Patience is not one of Matthew's virtues."

Demon's lips curved into a half-smile as she thought of her husband, and Angel suppressed the wave of envy that swept through her. Why couldn't her love for Lucas be like that? Why couldn't it make her smile when she thought of him, rather than weep and scream with mixed yearning and fear? Angel was desperate for the same sort of love that her sisters had, but deep down she knew that she had chosen the wrong man for that. Loving Lucas would never be free of pain.

Angel smiled bravely back at her sisters. "I'm much better now. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let him get to me like that. I'll learn to control myself better one day. I'm sure you wouldn't have lost control like that, Demon, if you'd met Lucas."

Demon leaned forward and hugged Angel tightly, whispering, "Don't be so sure. He's a very frightening man." With a gentle kiss on Angel's forehead, the tall blonde let her younger sister go, smiled sadly, and said, "Let's go."

Angel pushed herself up from the bench, wobbling a little until her sisters supported her on either side. She still felt faint, and wondered how she would walk all the way to the entrance hall. [Don't be a wimp, Angel! You can do it.] Lifting her chin, the raven haired witch stepped forward, determined that Lucas wouldn't destroy her life again.

"What's going on? What happened?" Gideon ran up the stairs as his wife appeared at the top, her arm around Angel, Lily on Angel's other side, both supporting their sister. Angel looked pale and tired, her eyes red, and her hair disheveled. Before any of the women could speak, Angel's knees started to give way. Deborah tried to haul her sister back to her feet, but couldn't stop her sliding downwards.

Gideon lunged forward, catching Angel, and swinging her up into his arms. He looked down at her as she lay with her head against his shoulder, and wished he could do what he so desperately wanted. To kiss her forehead, to comfort her, to protect her from whatever it was that had hurt her. He looked up to see Deborah smiling at him sadly. Then she stooped and lifted the train of Angel's dress, tucking it over Gideon's arm.

"Let's get her out of here and I'll tell you."

Gideon nodded, seething with impatience, but accepting that he had to wait until they had some privacy. Ever since John had burst into the room where he'd been playing poker, the Captain had been feeling that things were out of his control. It wasn't a feeling he enjoyed. He'd left the game, apologizing for leaving with so many of the other players' credits, then followed John out of the room.

He'd asked what the hell was going on, but John hadn't been able to enlighten him much, just saying that something had happened to upset Angel. Gideon had gone to find the Governor, making their apologies and explaining that his sister-in-law was unwell. Meanwhile, John had contacted the shuttle, and Luke had found their driver to take them back to the spaceport. The three men had then waited impatiently in the entrance hall until the women appeared at the top of the stairs.

Gideon carried Angel out to the ground transport, laying her gently on the seat, then letting Luke climb in next to her, to examine her. The rest of the party piled in behind, and the transport took off for the spaceport. After a few moments of silence, Luke said quietly, "She's all right. Her pulse is strong, her breathing regular. She should come around any time now."

The Captain heaved a sigh of relief and turned to his wife, asking what had caused Angel's distress. Deborah explained quietly about Angel's mystery dancing partner, keeping her voice low, so the driver couldn't hear her.

Gideon's anger grew steadily as she spoke, until he finally burst out, "Dammit, Deborah, why didn't you tell me this back at the castle? I would have gotten Mike to find this bastard and throw the book at him! What the hell did he say to her to affect her so badly?"

Deborah tried to calm him, responding quietly, "That would only have made things worse. The best thing to do was to leave. Please, Matthew, let it go. Don't make a fuss. That will only make it worse for Angel."

Gideon fumed silently for a moment, having no choice but to accept what she said. She was right. Creating a stink wouldn't help Angel. He took a deep breath and calmed himself, then pulled his wife

gently to his side and kissed her. "OK, I'll stay calm. As long as Angel hasn't suffered any lasting hurt, and as long as she agrees that this is what she wants, when she wakes up."

Deborah looked up at him lovingly. "Thank you. It's for the best, I promise." She kissed him gently, then smiled as she asked, "How was your game?"

Gideon grinned. "Profitable." He looked across at where Angel was starting to come around, and leaned over the waking girl. He was startled when she opened her eyes and let out a small yelp of fear.

"Lucas! Oh God, no!"

Gideon hurried to soothe Angel, cursing himself for his stupidity. The girl had just had a flashback to when she'd been with Lucas, when he'd hurt her. Of course seeing Gideon, who was physically Lucas' double, would upset her. "It's OK, Angel. It's me, Matt. Not Lucas. Lucas was never here. It was just a bad memory. You're safe, I promise. Lucas will never get to you."

Angel moaned softly, and tears seeped from her eyes as she whispered, "Yes, he will. One day, he will." She turned and buried her head in Luke's shoulder. The doctor hugged her tightly, comforting her all the way back to the ship.

As they walked down the shuttle ramp into the landing bay, Lily laid her hand on Demon's arm and pulled her back gently. Gideon strode on ahead, still carrying Angel, insisting that he was taking her to Medbay for a check-up before she could go back to her quarters. Luke had agreed, so he had hurried off with Angel and Matt, leaving John with the other two women.

Lily sent to her lover, *[[John? Could you give me a moment with Demon?]]*

John smiled, kissed his partner on the forehead, and wished Demon good night, saying he would collect the twins from the Medbay crèche and see Lily in their rooms.

Demon hesitated, then tried to pull away from her younger sister, saying, "I have to collect Marcus."

Lily held up her hand. "He can wait another few minutes. I want the truth, Demon. What really happened down there? Where were you when we found Angel? What kept you so long?"

Demon looked down at the little redhead and shook her head sadly. "I can't tell you, Lily. You have one secret to keep from your partners. I won't burden you with another. Let it go, please."

Lily sighed. Demon was right. If it was something she couldn't share with John and Luke, it was better for her not to know. She looked up at the tall blonde anxiously, concerned for her big sister. Demon was always so controlled, so competent, that it was easy for others to forget that she had feelings, too. She didn't often show them, but Lily knew that Demon could be hurt more easily than most people knew.

She nodded sadly. "OK, I won't ask again. But Demon," she held onto her sister's arm as Demon turned to leave. The tall blonde looked back, enquiringly, "If you ever need to talk, to tell someone what happened tonight, I'm here. Never forget that. You don't always have to be the strong one. Sometimes I can be strong, too."

Tears welled up into Demon's eyes, and she leaned down to hug her little sister, whispering, "Thank you." Then she turned and ran for the door of the landing bay.

Lily sighed again, and followed more slowly.

Demon was leaning forward to unfasten the leather covering on her legs, when Matthew asked, "What's that?" She looked up to see he was pointing at the bruise on her breast. The bruise made by Lucas' badge. She shrugged and said nothing, pulling the leg guards off, and standing. As she put her arms behind her to unfasten the leather bra, Matthew moved forward and looked at her inner arm closely. "And that? Don't just shrug. That's a bruise. A bad one. How did it happen?"

Demon looked at her arm. He was right, there was a deep bruise there. She didn't remember banging herself, and for a second, she wondered how it had happened. Then she remembered the pain that had aroused her from her faint. Lucas had pinched her flesh and twisted it hard.

She shook her head again. "It must have happened while I was out on the balcony." Demon started to move toward the bathroom, where she kept a regenerator. She was suddenly afraid of undressing in front of her husband, worried about what other marks her encounter with Lucas might have left on her body. She wanted to check in private, and use the regenerator if necessary, before Matthew saw more that he would question.

Before she could move, Matthew grabbed her arm and pulled her around until she was facing him, pressed against his bare chest. While she had been putting Marcus to bed, he had started to undress, and had removed everything but his leather pants by the time Demon had joined him in the bedroom.

The soft hairs of his chest caressed Demon's skin as he held her close and looked deep into her eyes. He leaned forward and kissed her gently, then pulled back and spoke quietly. "I know something was going on tonight, but I don't know what. You and Angel, and probably Lily, are keeping secrets. That's OK. I trust you. Whatever happened, I'm sure you'd have told me if I needed to know. Just promise me that if you need to share this, you'll share it with me."

Demon looked up into his warm, golden eyes, so different from Lucas' eyes, despite them being identical in color and shape. Lucas' eyes were cold, and full of hate and anger. Matthew's eyes held only sadness and love. The tall blonde put her arms around her husband's neck and lowered her head to his shoulder. She let some of her fears wash away from her, as she rested in his arms. After a few moments, she lifted her head, looked up at him, and smiled, saying the only thing she could think of at that moment. The thing that meant more to her than anything else in the galaxy.

"I love you."



Lucas leaned back in the seat of his spaceship, putting his hands behind his head and smiling. Mission accomplished. He'd done everything he'd set out to on his visit to Ceti Gamma III. He'd seen Angel, kissed her, fondled her, and reminded her who was boss. He regretted the lack of time and privacy that had prevented any further intimacies, but he'd never expected that anyway. Ah well, another time.

His exchange with Demon had been equally satisfying. He'd threatened her, frightened her, and found a new weakness to use against her, if he ever needed it. One day she would *really* pay for having taken his son away from him, but for now, Lucas was content with scaring her.

For a moment, he let his mind wander to the third sister, whom he hadn't encountered on this trip. Pity. A few moments with the luscious Lily might have been fun. One day, he'd like to pluck that flower again.

There was only one sour note as far as Lucas was concerned. His local contact had advised him that Captain Giddy-up had won big time at the poker table. The man must cheat even better than Lucas had heard. The table had been so heavily rigged that the Captain shouldn't have stood a chance. He was supposed to have been cleaned out. Lucas wondered exactly where Gideon had gotten those two Queens he'd produced in the hand where he'd made his biggest win. Not from the deck, that was for sure. That had been stacked against him.

Despite everything, Lucas couldn't help feeling a little proud of his descendant. Maybe Gideon was a chip off the old block after all.

A very small chip.

Lucas closed his eyes and smiled, dwelling on the memory of how Angel had looked in her Scarlett O'Hara dress.

The trip had certainly been worth it, even if it had been quite a gamble.

Demon lay awake, resting her head on her hand as she looked down at the face of her sleeping husband. The soft light coming through the doorway from the living area was just enough to provide illumination for her to see by. She smiled as she looked at Matthew's handsome face, his strong profile, his sensual mouth and strong chin. She adored this man more than life itself, and because of Lucas she now had to deceive him.

It had nearly broken Demon's heart not to be able to confide in her husband. Over the last three years she had finally learned to depend on him, to trust him enough to let him see her weaknesses and vulnerabilities, something she had never been able to do with anyone else in her life. While she trusted her sisters completely, Demon had always been the leader, the strong one, the one on whom they all relied. Only with Matthew could she allow herself to be weak.

Now that luxury had been taken from her. Demon couldn't tell Matthew what had happened. How could she tell him of the decision that awaited her in the future? How could she tell him that there was only one choice she could make? She could never give her son to Lucas, and Matthew would never allow that anyway. Demon could never abandon her sister to become Lucas' plaything, a toy for him to use and then break. Which meant there was only one option. If the price for getting Lucas to leave her family alone was to give him a son of his own, then that was the price Demon knew she would have to pay. But how could she ever explain that to Matthew? She knew she couldn't, and that he would never allow her to make that sacrifice.

The situation was impossible. There was only one way out of the mess that Demon could see. She would have to kill Lucas. Somehow, someday, she would have to find him and kill him, before her destroyed her family and everything she loved.

Reaching out to brush away a lock of hair that had fallen over Matthew's forehead, Demon leaned forward and kissed his brow, barely brushing her lips against his skin, so as not to disturb his sleep. Then she lay back on her pillow and stared at the ceiling, wondering how she would accomplish what she needed to do.

Demon closed her eyes and sighed, thinking, [Never mind. I'll think about it tomorrow.]

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four J

{[Part 1: Gambling Man](#)} {[Part 2: Angel's Law](#)}