

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four M - Part 1: Awakening

by *The Space Witches*



A dangerous combination - just ask Dr. Hobbes.

Chapter 3

May 2272

Day 4: Gideon's quarters on the Excalibur - 01:00 am EST

Gideon lay back in his bed and sighed deeply. Dorothy had been absolutely right. There really was no place like home. He turned his head to kiss his wife, who lay snuggled at his side, her head resting on his shoulder as they lay enjoying the quiet aftermath of their lovemaking. All disagreements were resolved, all offenses forgiven, and life was good. There was just one little thing...

"Deborah?" He tried to keep the wheedling tone out of his voice, but he knew it was useless. His empathic wife would know at once that he wanted something.

"Hmm?" Deborah responded, while moving her head to kiss Gideon's chest, and her hand to slide up his thigh.

Gideon smiled. "No, not that. Not yet, anyway. There's something else."

Deborah lifted her head and pulled herself up the bed a little, so she could lie on her side with her head propped on one hand, looking at her husband quizzically. She reached out with her free hand and started to stroke his chest, playing with the hairs. Bending quickly to kiss his nipple, Deborah then grinned at Gideon, asking, "So what do you want, if not that?"

Gideon kissed her quickly and pulled her back to his side, choosing his words carefully. "That trick you and your sisters pulled, bringing back Marcus Cole. Could you adapt it? Do something similar, but different with the 'spell' or whatever it is you do?"

Deborah grinned at him. "You really hate it when we talk about 'magic', don't you? I have to say, the word doesn't sit easily with me, either. Give me a bit more information. What exactly do you have in mind?"

Gideon explained what he was looking for, watching as Deborah frowned in concentration. When he finished, she shook her head. "I don't know, Matthew. I'm not sure that's possible. I'd have to check with Angel and Lily, and they're..." she paused and closed her eyes for a moment, her face relaxing into the gentle smile Gideon associated with her linking with her sisters. Her eyes opened and her expression changed to one of regret. "They're both asleep. I can ask them in the morning."

Gideon nodded his agreement, but had to ask, "If it's possible, would you consider it? I know it would take a lot out of you. Would you be willing?"

Deborah smiled lovingly. "Of course I would. I'd have to ask Lily and Angel, though. They'd have to agree, too."

Gideon hugged her tightly, saying, "I'd even be willing to apologize to Angel for being such a grouch. If I had to."

Deborah laughed out loud and sat upright on the bed next to him. Gideon had to drag his eyes from her full breasts, which always threatened to snag his attention when they were naked in front of him. He looked up at Deborah's face as she said, "That would be a first! When was the last time you said you were sorry to anyone but me? I can't remember an occasion, can you?"

Gideon reached out and tweaked her nipple, which hardened instantly under his touch. Deborah yelped and tried to move away, but he grabbed her quickly, and rolled her onto her back. Looking down into her warm, golden eyes he admitted, "You may have a point there. A very small point. So small it's hardly worth considering, so I'm going to ignore it."

Deborah laughed again and reached up to caress her husband's face. He turned his head to kiss her hand as she said, "If you apologize for being a grouch, I'm sure Angel will also say sorry for the things she said and did. You two are as bad as each other. If I didn't love you both so much, I'd bang your heads together."

Gideon lowered his head to kiss his wife gently, then pulled away to smile down at her. "You're too good for us. We don't deserve you."

Deborah's smile turned lascivious. "I don't want to be deserved..."

Gideon laughed and interrupted before she could finish. "I remember. You don't want to be deserved, you just want to be fucked."

"Damn right!" Before he quite knew what was happening, Gideon found himself on his back, with Deborah leaning over him. "Ready to pay for your favor, Captain?" He watched as she licked her lips, her eyes suddenly dark with passion.

"I'm not sure. Kaa is pretty tired, you know. You wore him out." Gideon grinned up at her, knowing what he was saying was untrue. He was becoming more aroused with every second that passed, as his wife rubbed her naked body against him.

Deborah's smile widened, and she licked her lips again. "Well, maybe I'd better go wake that old snake 'up'." She started to kiss her way down his chest and belly, finally finding his swelling cock with her hands and tongue.

Gideon groaned, as he arched his back with pleasure. "Less of the old."

Day 4 : Gideon's office on the Excalibur - 10:00 am EST

"Your call to Babylon 5 has gone through, Captain. Captain Marriot is on the line."

Gideon swiveled in his chair, bringing himself around to face the viewscreen as he said, "Put him through, Lieutenant." The Comm. officer's face faded from the screen, to be replaced by that of Ben Marriot.

Gideon's old friend looked weary, his face deeply etched with lines of pain and exhaustion. Marriot managed a weak smile as he saw Gideon on the screen. "What can I do for you, Matt? Anything as long as you don't plan on bringing your family or those Narns back on board."

Gideon laughed. "No plans to let any of them loose on you, Ben. I think we did enough damage for one visit. But I thought you might like to meet the worst behaved member of the Gideon family, just for comparative purposes. Come over to dinner tonight, and meet my son. You'll think the rest of us are angels by comparison."

Ben laughed. "Having met your Angel, I can believe that. I'd like that, Matt. I'd like to meet your son."

Gideon nodded, pleased that his old friend had accepted. "You'll have to make allowances, though. Marcus has spent the last three days with the Narn pouchlings, so he's feeling a little deprived in the spot department. He insisted that his mother painted him all over this morning. We only just got away without shaving his head."

Roaring with laughter, Ben leaned forward to cut the channel, but Gideon interrupted him. "And after dinner..." he paused and looked intently at the wheelchair bound Captain.

Ben's face fell back into its previous pained lines. "Oh hell, Matt. I really don't want to..."

Gideon interrupted him. "You promised. You said you'd let Luke Raven look you over."

Ben looked exasperated as he replied, "I didn't promise. I said 'OK', and only because you insisted. Matt, I hate being poked around by doctors. I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime. Just let it be. I am what I am, and I've resigned myself to being in this thing," he thumped the arm of his wheelchair, "until I die. It won't stop me living my life."

Gideon shook his head. "But not the life you want to live, Ben. Not the life of a starship Captain, which is the life you should have had. Just give it one last shot. Please. If nothing else, Luke may be able to ease the pain."

Marriot's head lifted and he raised an eyebrow. "How did you know about that?"

Gideon smiled gently. "It's written all over your face. You didn't get those lines and the gray hairs from just doing your job. I know pain when I see it." The Captain of the Excalibur wished he hadn't seen so much pain over the years, but he had, and experienced it, too. It gave him a familiarity with the subject that made it impossible for Ben to deny what he was going through.

Marriot finally, reluctantly, nodded. "OK. Just to see if he can do something about the pain. I'll see you tonight." Leaning forward, the Captain of B5 cut off the connection abruptly.

Gideon sat back in his chair and smiled. It was all coming together. He lifted his commlink to his wrist and made the necessary calls.

Day 4 : Gideon's quarters on the Excalibur - 11:00 am EST

"Well? Can you do it?" Gideon stood with his hands on his hips, staring at his wife and her sisters as they sat huddled together on the sofa. Angel still looked tired, and his anxiety about her led him to sound more irritable and demanding than he'd intended. The result was inevitable.

Angel snapped back at him, "Why should I help old Hotel Marriot? He was pretty damned unpleasant to me. I don't normally put myself out for people who are as cruel as he was."

Gideon gritted his teeth, holding onto the remaining shreds of his temper. "He's in pain, Angel. Sometimes it comes out as being a little abrupt."

Angel almost snarled. "Abrupt? He was horrible! And he's not the only one who's suffered, you know. Anyway, I thought you didn't want me to cast any more spells." Her voice turned sarcastic as she quoted his previous comments. "Did you for one moment stop to consider what would have happened if Deborah and Lily had been caught with you performing the spell? ... just as always, you acted selfishly. You did what you wanted, without giving a damn about the consequences." Angel dropped back to her normal tones to hiss at Gideon, "But I guess now it's something you want, the consequences don't matter, and it isn't selfish at all!"

Gideon was ready to explode when Deborah stood abruptly, her face like thunder. "Stop it! I have just about had enough of the two of you doing this. Why don't you *both* think of the consequences? Do you know how much this hurts? Do you have any idea what it does to me when you get like this? I *feel* your anger." She turned and snapped at Angel, "And don't remind me that I can't feel your emotions as I can with others. When you get really angry, I *can* feel it. It hurts! It makes me sick and nauseous. Just like when I feel the pain Ben Marriot endures every day. That makes me nauseous, too!" Turning back to face Gideon, Deborah yelled, "Your stupid anger makes me want to run away from both of you, as far as I can get. Is that what you want?"

Gideon was taken aback. He'd never seen Deborah react like that before, and what she said about Ben Marriot made him feel as guilty as hell. He opened his mouth to speak, but she rounded on him. "Shut up!"

Just don't say it. Whatever it was, keep it to yourself." The Captain closed his mouth and raised an eyebrow, waiting for his wife to calm down. He looked across at Angel, seeing that she was as surprised as he at Deborah's outburst.

Lily giggled quietly, then looked at the three people standing above her. "When you've all quite finished yelling, maybe we could get back to the subject? I believe you wanted a favor, Captain." The little redhead rose gracefully from the sofa, walked over to Gideon and only stopped when her breasts pressed into his chest. Gideon glanced down, his eyes drawn inescapably into the deep cleavage of Lily's dress. He could see the head of her snake tattoo peeking out from between her breasts. Licking his suddenly dry lips, the Captain went to speak, but Lily reached up and laid her fingers on his lips.

"Shh. Didn't you hear what Demon said? Shut up, Captain. Just for once, listen to us." Lily put her tiny hands against Gideon's chest and pushed. The Captain could have easily resisted the pressure she brought to bear, but he was intrigued, and wanted to see what she was up to. He allowed himself to be pushed backward until the back of his knees hit a chair and he sat abruptly.

Gideon watched in silence as the tiny witch rounded on her sisters. "And you two are nearly as bad as that great lummoX of a Captain over there. Both of you can sit down and shut up, too."

To Gideon's surprise, Deborah and Angel gave way to their younger sister, sitting silently on the sofa together, while Lily looked down at them all. The satisfied smile on her face showed how much she was enjoying the novel perspective.

Lily stood with her hands on her hips and looked from one to the other of her audience. "Now. The Captain has a problem, and we may be able to solve it. He doesn't deserve our help, because he's been downright nasty to our sister, but we all know what Demon says about deserving."

Gideon swallowed hurriedly. Surely Deborah hadn't told her sisters about what she preferred to being deserved? Lily put him out of his misery with her next words.

"If we all got what we deserved, the world would be a miserable place. So just this once, the Captain is going to get what he wants, not what he deserves."

*Gideon drew on years of experience at the poker table, and kept his face straight. Little did Lily know how often Deborah gave him what he wanted, rather than what he deserved, and how often his wife got what she both wanted *and* deserved.*

Day 4 : Gideon's quarters on the Excalibur - 9:00 pm EST

Angel looked warily across the dinner table at Captain Marriot. She'd been watching him surreptitiously all through dinner, and during the time before, when Gideon had circulated with hors d'ouvres for their guests, explaining that Demon was getting Marcus ready for bed.

Marriot had apparently forgiven Angel for the disruption she'd caused on his station. The Captain of B5 had smiled at her when she'd arrived, taking her hand and bowing over it in a chivalrous manner, which had taken Angel by surprise. He looked up at her face, which she knew expressed her astonishment clearly, and given her a mischievous grin.

"Don't look so shocked, Ms. Denier. Now you're on your own territory, you can't cause any trouble on

mine, and I've always enjoyed the company of beautiful ladies."

Angel couldn't help laughing, telling him to call her Angel, and she had sat talking to Marriot, trying to get him to tell indiscrete stories about Gideon's youth. The Captain of the Excalibur had protested and threatened to reciprocate, so Marriot had smiled apologetically, saying, "He's got too much material he could blackmail me with, Angel. For once, I'd better be discrete."

As they'd talked, Angel concluded that when he wasn't shouting at her, she quite liked Captain Marriot. He had an acerbic sense of humor, and could be as witty and sarcastic as Gideon. It was obvious why the two men had become friends. They had a lot in common.

The main difference between them was how their lives had turned out. While they had both risen to the rank of Captain, doing jobs they enjoyed and were well suited for, Marriot's life seemed to have little in it other than his job. Angel had watched him when Demon had brought Marcus through before dinner to say goodnight.

The little boy had looked incredibly sweet in his pajamas, clutching Half-Ted close to his chest, sucking on one of the teddy bear's ears. With his blond curls and big brown eyes, Marcus could appear angelic when he wanted, and when he got an attack of shyness, as he had when his mother had brought him in to see their visitors, he looked almost unbearably cute. Angel couldn't help smiling to herself as she thought about her nephew. Those angelic looks hid a devilish nature, all too appropriate for the son of a mother nicknamed Demon. Fortunately, the devil in Marcus had stayed well hidden that evening.

Marriot had smiled sadly at Marcus, as the little boy turned his head into his mother's shoulder, refusing all coaxing to say hello to his father's friend. Gideon had snorted, amused at his son's reticence. "Usually we can't shut him up. It's typical that he should give us the silent treatment just when we want him to talk. At least he let us wash off his Narn spots earlier." Gideon had reached out and fondly tousled his three year old son's hair, then he had taken Marcus from his mother, carrying the little boy through to the adjoining quarters, to put him to bed.

Angel had observed Marriot, as he'd watched Gideon carrying Marcus out, apparently unaware of the conversation going on between John, Luke, and Lily about having persuaded Trace Miller to baby-sit for them that evening. The Captain of B5 had looked longingly after his friend, and Angel could see how much Marriot regretted not having a family of his own, and how much he envied what Gideon had.

Demon must have picked up on those feelings, as she had joined them at that moment, distracting Marriot by asking him to tell them what it was like living in a multi-species society like B5. Marriot had quickly pulled himself together, and soon became animated, recounting some of his experiences since taking command of the space station.

When Gideon had rejoined them, they'd moved to the dining table. It had been a bit of a squeeze getting seven people seated, especially when one of them required additional space for his wheelchair. Nevertheless, dinner had been a great success, with the conversation lively.

Gideon had helped Demon serve a wonderful meal, preening slightly when he confessed responsibility for the delicious soup. Angel had been a little surprised, not so much that the Captain cooked, but more that he was willing to admit it. Demon had served a traditional English roast, followed by a mouthwatering Banana-toffee pie for dessert, accompanied by some excellent wines, which had left everyone around the table suffused with a sense of well-being. Angel noticed that Demon and Lily had only sipped at their wine, just as she had. They all wanted clear heads for what was to come to later.

Nibbling on a morsel of cheese, Angel still wasn't sure why she had agreed to do what Gideon wanted. Her brother-in-law hadn't been exactly kind to her these last few days, but she had been so amused by the startled look on his face when Lily had lambasted them all earlier, that she hadn't been able to withhold her co-operation for long, especially after Demon had commented on how much pain Marriot was in. Having spent the evening getting to know Marriot a little better, Angel decided that she was glad she had agreed. She could only hope that what they had planned would work, and that she wasn't too tired to carry out her part. She had slept almost continuously since returning to the Excalibur, but she still felt as if a pall of exhaustion hung over her.

"Well, Trace will probably be climbing the walls by now, so Lily and John had better get back and rescue him, while I still have one last job to do before I can join them." Luke's deep voice jolted Angel from her thoughts and she looked quickly at Marriot to see his response.

He groaned softly, and gave the doctor a rueful grin. "Don't let me keep you from your family, Doctor. I'm more than happy to let you off that job."

A growl from Gideon at the far end of the table signaled his disagreement. "Oh, no you don't! Don't try and wriggle out of it now, Ben. You agreed, and Luke's got Medbay all prepped and ready for you. Off you go and take your medicine."

Marriot sighed theatrically and pushed his wheelchair back from the table. After a round of goodbyes, he and Luke departed, leaving the others to help Demon clean up. When everything was cleared away, Gideon looked at Angel and her sisters.

"Ready?"

Angel, Demon and Lily all nodded, while John murmured that he would stay with Marcus, kissed Lily quickly, and slid through the doors to the adjoining quarters where the little boy slept.

Looking at the three witches again, Gideon took a deep breath. "Let's do it."

Day 4 : Medbay on the Excalibur - 10:00 pm EST

"OK, he's out cold and I've ordered everyone out of here. We're ready when you are." Luke looked up at the three women standing in the doorway and nodded.

He'd persuaded Marriot to accept a mild sedative, assuring the Captain that it wouldn't react badly with the alcohol he'd consumed, and it would help with the examination. Marriot had agreed with a degree of resignation, admitting to Luke that anything which alleviated the pain would be welcome.

Luke had recognized all the signs of affliction as he'd watched Marriot during dinner. Unfortunately, with the type of injury the Captain had suffered, it was not uncommon for the back to continue to give pain, often for the rest of the victim's life. The sufferer had a choice between taking strong painkillers, which could dull the reactions and the thought processes, or living with the pain. Marriot had chosen the latter option, and the marks of his constant discomfort were engraved on his face.

Passing the Captain the sedative to drink, Luke hadn't told him just how strong a dose he had prepared. Within minutes, Marriot had been deeply asleep. Luke had run the scanner over his patient while waiting

for Gideon and the sisters to join him. The injury had been obvious. The spinal column was twisted and the spinal cord almost completely severed. The small connection that remained was just sufficient to transmit pain, without providing Marriot with any degree of control over his lower limbs, or any sensation other than the burning, stabbing ache that constantly plagued him. There was some evidence of muscular degeneration, but Luke had been able to tell that Marriot had persevered with his exercises, and his legs were not as wasted as the doctor might have expected.

Luke had pulled at his lower lip as he considered. It was possible that with appropriate use of the latest version of the regenerator technology, he might be able to improve the Captain's condition, without resorting to more esoteric alternatives. The problem was that any such treatment would be slow, and while the spinal cord gradually repaired itself, the pain would be excruciating. The doctor had shaken his head. If there was a better, faster way, which would cause the patient less pain, then they should use it.

Demon moved to the foot of the bed on which Marriot lay, while Angel and Lily moved either side, parallel with the middle of Marriot's chest. Gideon came silently around the bed to stand beside Luke. They watched as the three women linked hands and shut their eyes, murmuring odd words in a language unknown to both men.

Gideon leaned toward the doctor and whispered, "Do you have any idea what they're going to do?"

Demon spoke without opening her eyes, her voice quite different from her usual deep husky tones. There was an echoing quality to it, almost as if several voices were harmonizing together. "Matthew, darling. Shut up, will you? We're working, Captain."

Somehow, it seemed to Luke that each woman had spoken in turn through Demon's mouth. The first words had been her own. The order to be quiet had come from Angel, while the final, slightly amused comment seemed to echo with Lily's vibrant tones. Luke shook his head. [Weird. That's what you get for consorting with witches. Weird.]

He looked at Gideon and shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he was as much in the dark as the Captain. As he turned back to watch the sisters, he saw a soft white glow start to radiate out from their bodies, merging together to form a single field of light, which enveloped the women and the man lying on the bed between them. The points at which the sisters' hands touched glowed more fiercely white, and suddenly, lines of light sprang out from each of those points.

One line went from Demon's right hand to her left, another appeared between each of Lily's hands, and the last between Angel's hands. The result was a triangle of blinding white light that hovered above Marriot as he lay sleeping beneath. The center of the triangle was located exactly above the site of the Captain's injury at the base of his spine.

The aura surrounding the women slowly condensed, appearing to drain down their arms, until it filled only the triangle of light that was held between them. Then they lowered their arms slowly; the triangle of light, and the aura it held, descended.

When the light and the aura touched Marriot, there was a silent implosion. The light surged inwards, appearing to be sucked into the Captain's body. With a gasp, the three women fell back, losing their grip on each other's hands. Marriot's body convulsed, his back arching off the bed, but he made no sound, and his sleep remained undisturbed.

Gideon rushed to Demon's side, holding onto her as she clutched at the foot of the bed. At the same time,

he reached out to try and hold Angel up, as her knees trembled where she stood to one side. Luke had in the same moment reached Lily, and he held her with one arm, while he, too, reached across the bed to steady Angel. For a moment, he wondered whether he should have allowed this procedure to continue. None of the sisters was fully recovered from their efforts in bringing Marcus Cole back to life, and Angel was still weak after being drugged and kidnapped. Giving up even more of her life-force in this way could have been dangerous.

Luke watched with some concern, but all three sisters regained their equilibrium within a few seconds. The doctor smiled down at his red-headed lover, who he held close to his side. "Are you OK? Can I do anything?"

Lily smiled and stood on tip-toe to kiss his jaw. "We're fine. It's just a little draining. How's Captain Marriot?"

Luke swiveled to check on the Captain, who lay, still unconscious, on the bed. Picking up a scanner, the doctor ran it over the prone man. "He's fine. Deeply asleep, but he should come around soon."

Gideon's voice came from the foot of the bed. "Did it work?"

Luke turned to see his Captain still had his arm around Demon's waist, although the tall blonde was obviously completely recovered. Gideon had pulled Angel across to join them, and his other arm was wrapped around the raven haired girl's shoulders. Unlike Demon, Angel still looked a little unsteady, and she leaned against the Captain's shoulder for support.

Again, Luke wondered whether he should have allowed Angel to exert herself, but before he could respond, Lily answered, "We don't know. It's not like with Marcus, when we could see the results at once. We shared our life-force with Captain Marriot, but we focused it narrowly on his injury. It will take a little while before we know if the energy has healed him."

Luke picked up on the comment. "And he's going to wake up any time now, so I think it would be best if the three of you left." He nodded at Angel and Demon, squeezing Lily's waist, then continued, "Captain? Do you want to stay? Marriot might expect you to be here."

He watched Gideon consider the question, knowing that he would be torn. Luke could see that the Captain wanted to go with his wife and her sister, ensuring they were fully recovered. Gideon also wanted to know whether his plan for his friend's healing had worked. Demon solved his dilemma. She kissed her husband gently on the cheek, then disentangled herself from his embrace, moving to his other side to support Angel.

"We should go, and you should stay, Matthew. I'll help Angel back to her rooms, then I'll wait for you in bed. Don't keep me waiting too long." She gave Gideon a lascivious grin, completely at odds with the pallor of her face. Demon was putting on a brave show for her husband.

Gideon smiled and lifted her free hand to his lips, whispering something that Luke couldn't hear, before pushing the two sisters gently toward the door, giving Demon a friendly swat on the rear as she walked away with Angel. The tall blonde looked over her shoulder and winked, then left the room, saying, "I'll send John to help Lily back to her quarters."

After the doors closed, there was a moment of silence before Lily said softly, "I'm quite capable of getting myself home, you know."

Luke looked down at her and smiled. Her skin was even paler than usual, but her emerald green eyes sparkled with amusement. The doctor knew he was lucky that he wasn't being accused of being over-protective. If he'd dared to advise that Lily wait for John, rather than the suggestion coming from Demon, he'd probably have got bitten. Hard.

Luke kissed his red-headed temptress gently on the forehead. "Of course you can, my love. But you know how scared John gets if he has to travel on the bullet cars by himself at night. Why don't you wait for him here? Then he won't have to ride the bullet car alone."

Lily giggled and reached up to place a finger on Luke's lips. "Silly boy," she whispered gently, as he lowered his mouth to kiss her.

Gideon cleared his throat from the other side of the bed. "Um, Doc..." he trailed off as he pointed a thumb at the bed. Luke saw that Marriot was stirring, and quickly ushered Lily away into the outer room of Medbay to wait for John.

Marriot felt as if he was floating to the surface of a warm pool of contentment. For the first time in years, there was no pain. He felt relaxed and rested in a way he hadn't since the accident. He called it that, but he knew it hadn't been a mistake. That Marine had deliberately thrown him down the stairwell, to stop him getting to the bridge of the Heracles, where he'd planned to relieve the Captain of his command during the battle with the Agamemnon.

Sometimes, Marriot relived that moment in his dreams. The sensation of flying, interrupted by a series of sharp pains as various parts of his body made contact with the steps, then the sickening agony in his back as he landed awkwardly. After that, there was only pain and nausea, until he'd come around in the Agamemnon's Medbay, to find his friend Matt Gideon looking down at him. Matt had been the one who had given him the bad news that his back was broken. Matt had been there when Marriot discovered that he could no longer move his legs, and had no sensation, other than pain, below the waist.

It was with a sense of déjà vu that Marriot opened his eyes and saw Matt Gideon's face looming over him. Blurry at first, just like it had been on the Agamemnon, but gradually coming into focus, just as it had then. But there was one big difference between then and now. There was no pain. None at all.

Marriot sighed softly. He could never have dreamed that the absence of something could produce such pleasure. His sigh was met with a frown from Gideon. "Ben? Are you OK? How do you feel?"

Marriot smiled at the anxiety in his friend's voice. Everyone thought Matt Gideon was a hard case, but his close friends knew better. It was because he cared that the loss of the Cerberus had hit him so badly. It had saddened Gideon's few close friends to watch him withdraw into a shell of isolation after that event.

"I feel great. Whatever the stuff your doctor gave me was, I want a few hundred liters of it to take back to B5. I haven't felt this good in years."

A deep chuckle from the other side of the bed attracted Marriot's attention to the doctor standing there. Luke Raven said quietly, "I'm not sure we can attribute all your well-being to the sedative, but it's good to hear you're feeling better. Now just lie quietly for a minute, while I do another scan."

Marriot closed his eyes, still suffused with a sense of relaxation and contentment. Somehow, all seemed well with the world, and he felt more at peace with himself than he had done in years. A small, sharp

prick made him open his eyes abruptly.

"What the...?" He lifted his head to glare at Raven, who was standing at the foot of the bed, holding a pin. "What did you do that for? That hurt!"

Raven raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Did it? Good." Marriot watched as the doctor lowered his hand, and again jabbed the pin into his victim's bare foot.

"Ow! Stop doing that! What are you, some kind of sad--" Marriot stopped in mid-word, as the implication of what had just happened hit him. He had felt Raven pricking his foot with the pin. He had felt it! He stared open-mouthed at Raven, turning in astonishment to Gideon, as his old friend started to laugh.

"A little slow today, Ben? Maybe we should stick a match between your toes and light it. That might get your attention." Gideon's grin was shark-like, but Marriot was too stunned to retaliate. He was aware that he was probably doing a very good impression of a gold-fish, opening and closing his mouth, with no sound emerging, but he was unable to speak.

After a few moments, Raven took pity on him and laughed, moving to stand by Marriot's side, and taking him through a further series of tests. By the end of half an hour, they had established that sensation had been partially restored to the Captain's lower limbs, and he had some motor control, but only a little. Marriot tried hard not to be disappointed, knowing it was a miracle that he could feel and move at all.

Raven smiled gently at him, explaining, "You need to get the strength back in your legs. You've been pretty good at exercising, but there's still been a lot of wastage. You need to build the muscles back up. Once you've done that, you should regain full use of everything below the waist." The doctor raised a wicked eyebrow, but Marriot was speechless, unable at first to take it all in. He was going to walk again. He was going to regain all the facilities he had lost. For the first time in years, he would be able to stand up and take a piss for himself. That was suddenly the most important reason he could think of for getting the use of his legs back. On further consideration, maybe the second most important reason. He was still struggling for words, when Raven continued, "I have a favor to ask, Captain."

Marriot grinned broadly. "Whatever you want, doc, you can have it. Full run of all the bars and casinos on B5, every credit I possess, you can even take my left testicle if you want it. Just leave me with one, as it looks like I may have a use for it now." The Captain wanted to laugh, scream, shout, and turn cartwheels around Medbay. How could he ever describe what he was feeling? How could he ever repay this man for what he had done?

Raven shook his head and laughed. "Keep them both. You have a lot of catching up to do, and very soon now, your 'equipment' will be telling you it wants some exercise. Try not to overdo it." He paused, and his face fell into more serious lines. "No, what I want from you is a promise. You can't tell anyone what we did here today. You have to agree to go along with what I'll tell Doctor Hobbes."

Marriot frowned, wondering why Raven was so reluctant to take credit for the miracle he'd worked. "Why? What are you going to tell Hobbes?"

Raven smiled ruefully. "I'll tell her the truth. That this was an experimental procedure, which I'm not yet ready to have more widely known. It may have been a fluke, and I'm not sure if it could be repeated. I don't want any publicity about what happened here, no reports in the medical journals, nothing." Marriot went

to protest, but Raven waved him into silence. "There are a lot of wrinkles I need to iron out before we can go public with this. Please, I need you to promise."

Marriot sighed and nodded reluctantly. "If that's what you want. But as I don't really know what you did anyway, I can't tell anyone much, can I? So how did you fix me up, Doc?"

The doctor held up a regenerator. It was similar to the kind Marriot was familiar with. The devices had become common over the past few years, and were a standard piece of medical equipment. Something very similar had been used to cure humanity of the Drakh plague, by removing the virus from the bloodstream of the infected people. Hard to believe that the human race owed its very existence to such a small mechanism.

Raven waved the regenerator as he said, "Call it magic. This little thing on its own might have helped over time, but it would have been a long and painful road to recovery. Let's just say that with a little help from a few magic spells, we speeded up the process."

Marriot laughed and looked over to Gideon, who had stood silently observing the exchange between the other two men. "Magic. Hmm, has that pet Technomage of yours been hanging around your Medbay, Matt? They're the magic specialists, aren't they?"

The Captain of the Excalibur kept his face dead-pan as he said, "I've learned not to ask too many questions about what Galen gets up to. He comes and goes. Usually when he's least wanted and most needed." Gideon allowed a smile to emerge, and he leaned forward to help Marriot sit upright and swing his legs off the bed. "As you'll need to be doing some leg work before you're able to get back on your feet, let me give you a hand into that chariot of yours."

Marriot allowed Gideon and Raven to help him back into his wheelchair. He didn't need their help; he'd become quite proficient at getting in and out by himself over the years. But now he knew he wouldn't have to do this for much longer, and he sensed that the two men wanted to do something, anything to change the subject. So why was Galen such a sore topic of conversation? Marriot decided he didn't care. Perhaps one day he'd meet the Technomage and would be able to thank him personally. And if not, he could thank Gideon and Raven, who now stood back and smiled at him.

There was nothing else Marriot could say or do, so he put everything he had, his utmost sincerity, into a single phrase. "Thank you."

Day 4 : Excalibur's Landing Bay - 11:59 pm EST

Gideon watched as Marriot's shuttle took off, then turned to Raven, who stood by his side, watching through the view port into the landing bay. He spoke softly, so the crew members who stood nearby, carrying out their duties, couldn't hear. "If the sisters ever find out that we let Galen take the credit for what they did, we're dead meat."

Luke chuckled softly. "I have no desire to become more intimately acquainted with Lily's dagger, so I'll keep my mouth shut, if you will."

Gideon grinned and nodded. The two men turned to walk back toward the bullet car tube, and waited in silence for their transport to arrive. When it did, they climbed on, and the Captain sank onto one of the benches and sighed deeply. "You really think he'll recover fully, Luke?" He looked anxiously across at the

doctor sitting opposite.

Raven leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and nodded, wearily. "It looks promising. The spinal cord is now completely intact, and the part of the spinal column that was damaged and twisted has repaired itself and straightened. I have no idea how they did it, but somehow the sisters fixed everything. All Captain Marriot needs to do now is to remind his muscles how to work, and build them up a bit." The doctor looked up at Gideon, his face showing a mixture of astonishment and concern. "Matt, if they can do this for Marriot..." he left the sentence incomplete.

*Gideon shook his head and frowned. "Don't even think about it. We took one hell of a risk tonight. Every time they use their powers, the danger of detection increases. I will *not* take the chance of my wife and son, or her sisters, being taken away from me, to be experimented on. I shouldn't have asked them to help Ben but..." This time it was Gideon's turn to leave his sentence unfinished. He stared at his feet for a moment, as he pondered on why he had asked for the witches' help. Friendship? Or was it guilt? The Captain decided he was probably better off not knowing. He looked up at Raven and went on, "And besides the risk, there's the drain on their energy. We both saw how they looked after they'd finished. Lily and Deborah looked exhausted, and Angel could hardly stand."*

The Captain shook his head, remembering how Angel had looked when he'd last seen her. Deborah had been half-holding her sister up as they had left Medbay together. He should never have asked Angel to give so much when she was already tired from her adventures on B5. Before he could pursue his self-recrimination further, his thoughts were interrupted.

Raven sighed. "You're right, of course. In fact, I want to look in on Angel and make sure she's OK on my way home." Gideon was relieved. He hadn't wanted to ask Luke to do that, but he was pleased the doctor had decided to see Angel of his own volition.

"Good. I would have gone myself but..."

Luke interrupted with a smile, "But you should get home to your wife and son. That's OK, Matt. John is with Lily, and I know they'll understand. I'll check Angel out."

Gideon wasn't sure that Luke understood at all, but he decided to leave it there. His relationship with his wife's younger sister was too complicated to think about at this time of night. Actually, he tried to avoid thinking about it at any time of day or night. Sitting back on the bench, the Captain yawned mightily and stretched his arms above his head as the bullet car came to a halt.

"Well, this is where I get off. Good night, Luke, and thanks. For everything."

Gideon stood and left the bullet car, striding along the corridor toward his quarters. When he thought about what would be waiting for him there, he couldn't help but smile.

Day 6 : Captain's office on Babylon 5 - 11:00 pm EST

Gideon watched with amusement as Ben Marriot kept Angel and Lily in hysterical laughter with his stories. Ben had always been an excellent raconteur, and he'd always enjoyed the company of beautiful women. He was in his element.

"Penny for them." The voice in his ear was low and sultry. Gideon smiled and turned to his wife, putting

his arm around her shoulders and pulling her to close to his side.

He kissed her cheek before saying, "Nothing worth paying that much for. You know you can get anything you want from me for free."

Deborah chuckled and moved her arm around his waist, fitting herself against Gideon's side. He loved the way she fitted so neatly there, the warmth of her body against his, and the scent of her skin and her hair. Smiling inside, he admitted to himself that he loved everything about her. [Damn good thing you're married to her then, isn't it?]

Keeping her voice low and soft, Deborah said, "Everyone's having a good time. It was a nice idea of Ben's to throw this party before we left."

Gideon agreed. While the location of the party in the Captain's office may have seemed odd, it was certainly big enough for the ten people there, and the view of the central core of B5 from the office window was spectacular. The partygoers had mingled, splitting into smaller groups, then reforming as conversation and wine flowed.

While Ben was busy charming the ladies, Luke Raven was engrossed in a conversation with Dr. Hobbes and her husband. Gideon was willing to give good odds that they were talking shop. John Matheson and Marcus Cole had moved over to the window, and Marcus seemed to be pointing out the location of various places around the central core of Babylon 5. Having been attached to the station for so long, Marcus was very familiar with the layout of the place.

Ben still sat in his wheelchair, talking to Angel and Lily as they sat on the sofa, but when they had arrived, he'd told Gideon—with a grin that went from ear to ear—that he'd taken his first steps earlier that day. He'd needed to use two sticks for support, but it was the first time he'd been able to move around without his wheelchair since the accident. Gideon had also noticed that the lines of pain seemed to have been erased from Marriot's face. He looked ten years younger, and happier than Gideon had ever seen him. The change was a transformation, and Gideon could once again see the man he'd first met so many years before, rather than the crippled, pain-ridden wreck he'd become.

A sense of pleasure and pride rose through Gideon's chest and throat to leave a lingering smile on his lips. Then he felt Deborah's lips on his cheek and heard her whisper, "You feel nearly as good about it as he does."

Gideon laughed softly, then turned and said quietly, "I thought you were an empath, not a telepath. How do you know what I feel good about? Maybe it's just because I have my arm around the most beautiful woman in the galaxy, and I know what I'm going to do with her later." He winked and smiled lasciviously.

Deborah chuckled. "Just a guess, but a very educated one. I know you, Matthew Gideon, and not just in the biblical sense. Ben is happy now. The pain has gone, and with it the exhaustion, depression and despair I felt from him when we first met. I'm glad your idea worked."

Gideon tightened his grip around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her ear, then whispering. "Thanks to you and your sisters. I mean that. Thanks." Relaxing again, he glanced at the clock on the wall and changed the subject. "By the time we get back to the Excalibur, it will be close to midnight, and the babysitter will want double time. I think it's time we made a move."

They had actually left Marcus in the Medbay crèche along with his cousins, but Gideon wanted to get an early start the following morning, as Ben had promised that the loading of all supplies would be completed by 08:00 the next day.

Deborah sighed softly and pouted a little. Gideon knew she'd enjoyed the evening, and didn't want it to end. It was just the sort of party Deborah liked. Not too many people, which meant she had no problem blocking their emotions--if she wanted to. His wife might accuse the Captain of being nosey, but he knew she was just as bad.

She sighed deeply, saying, "That's what we get for not practicing safe sex. Home by midnight or our son turns into a pumpkin. The next time I get ravished by a passing starship Captain, I'm going to make sure he's up to date with his contraceptive shots."

Gideon laughed out loud and hugged her closely, saying, "And the next time I get seduced by a witch, I'll make sure she has a pack or two of condoms to hand." He then steered her toward the sofa where Ben was holding court. Gideon cleared his throat and Marriot looked up at him quizzically.

"I hate to end the party, but Deborah wants to take me back to the Excalibur and have her wicked way with me. Time to go." Gideon would never have made a joke like that before Ben's recovery. It would have been too cruel a contrast with his friend's disability. But now he could afford to tease his wife in the way he loved best. Casting a quick sideways glance he saw a hint of pink coloring Deborah's cheeks, and she pinched his waist in revenge. If he was very lucky, Gideon knew she would get her own back later.

Marriot laughed, "Now that must be such a terrible thing to look forward to." He turned to Angel and Lily and bowed his head, saying, "It looks like we'll have to continue our conversation the next time you come to visit B5."

Angel complained at once. "Oh no! You can't stop there!" She looked up at Gideon from where she lay half-sprawled along the sofa, showing a length of leg that made it hard for the Captain to look her in the eye. With a mischievous grin she said, "We've just got Ben to start telling us all about you and some waitress called Yvette, Captain. Do let him finish his story!"

Gideon glared down at Marriot, swallowing hard. John hearing that story was one thing, but he certainly didn't want Deborah to hear it, and the thought of what Angel would do with those facts made him pale in panic. Gideon protested loudly, "Ben, don't even think about it!"

Marriot gave him a feeble smile. "I couldn't help it. They asked me so nicely, and I'm sure you know how hard it is to say 'no' to these ladies."

Gideon laughed. "Damned right I do. I've never yet figured out how to make it stick. And you haven't met the worst of the women in our family. Lily's youngest, Naima, may be only two years old, but that redheaded temptress has every man on the Excalibur wrapped around her little finger. She's the biggest flirt on the ship."

Marriot laughed and leaned forward to take Lily's hand and kiss it. "If she's half as beautiful as her mother, I can believe everything you say."

Gideon watched as Lily basked in the light of Ben's admiration, then laughed as John and Luke came to claim their lady. The two sisters stood, and everyone started moving toward the door of Marriot's office, ready to take their leave. Then Gideon noticed that Marcus had drawn Angel to one side, and the couple

were standing together by the window, speaking softly, so no one could overhear them.

The Captain paused for a moment, wondering if he should call Angel to join the rest of the group. [Give them a minute, Matt. Let them say goodbye.] He smiled at his own thoughts, and decided he was getting sentimental in his old age.

But not so sentimental that he wasn't going to watch out for Angel and warn this Ranger to be careful of her feelings. Gideon let the others move on ahead and leaned back against the doorpost, his arms folded across his chest.

"You will call her, won't you?" Angel looked up anxiously into the serious gray-green eyes of the Ranger.

Marcus smiled and bent to kiss Angel's hand, holding onto her fingers after he raised his head, saying, "Of course. Tomorrow I plan to call Delenn and ask her if I can rejoin the Rangers. As soon as I get to Minbar, I'll contact Susan. Wherever she is, whatever she's doing, I'll find a way to make her listen to me. I was an idiot for waiting so long last time. I won't make that mistake again."

Angel smiled, and stood on tiptoe to kiss Marcus' cheek. It amused her that when the Ranger was serious, he didn't ramble at all.

"Take care of yourself, Marcus. Love wisely and well, and once you have your dream, don't let it go." A lump rose in Angel's throat and she swallowed it quickly, but she could do nothing about the tears that suddenly filled her eyes.

"And for you, Angel, I hope you find what you want and deserve. It's out there somewhere, I know. Just be patient."

Angel laughed. "I'm not very good at patient. But I'll try."

With one last squeeze of his hand, Angel turned and hurried out of the room. Without a word, she passed Gideon where he stood leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed.

"A minute of your time, Mr. Cole?"

Marcus turned from where he'd gone back to looking out of the window, to find the Captain of the Excalibur standing behind him. He'd thought everyone had gone and left him alone, but apparently he'd been mistaken. Matthew Gideon had the ability to move in complete silence when he wanted, and Marcus hadn't been aware that he'd remained.

"Yes, Captain? I thought you were in a hurry to get back to your ship." Marcus wasn't sure he liked this man. Gideon had been harsh with Angel, shouting at her unnecessarily. There was something more to their relationship than just being brother and sister in law, but Marcus had decided it was none of his business. Now it looked as if Gideon was about to make it his business.

"Not in so much of a hurry that I'd risk Angel's happiness. I wanted to tell you--to warn you--that Angel is much more vulnerable than you might think. Don't mess her around. She's had enough grief in her life; she doesn't need more."

Marcus was tempted to tell Gideon that he knew all about the grief in Angel's life, and he also knew who had been responsible for much of it. As he opened his mouth to speak, he looked more carefully at the Captain, and closed it again. Gideon was genuinely concerned for Angel. He didn't deserve to have that concern thrown in his face.

The Ranger smiled. "I promise you, I won't cause Angel grief. I think you've misunderstood our relationship. Angel and I have become friends, nothing more. But her friendship means a lot to me. I'll treasure it, and knowing it's there will give me the courage to pursue the woman I really love."

Gideon's face showed little. Marcus had heard that the Captain was an expert poker player, and now he could believe it, but some of the skills he'd learned as a Ranger helped him see the tiny signs of surprise that Gideon was trying to conceal. He hadn't been expecting that answer.

"What woman?" The question was blunt. Marcus tried to keep his own face straight. Angel had warned him that Gideon was curious by nature--OK, nosey--but the Ranger hadn't expected to be on the receiving end of that curiosity.

After a moment's internal debate, Marcus decided to answer honestly. He told Gideon how he had fallen in love with Susan Ivanova, but had left it too late to tell her about his feelings. Now he had a second chance, he intended to correct that mistake.

Gideon's poker face crumbled, and his astonishment was writ clear. "Ivanova? *Captain* Ivanova? Captain Susan *Iron-pants* Ivanova?" The Captain took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I'm impressed. Ivanova is even more formidable than my wife, and that's saying something. Good luck, Mr. Cole. You're going to need it!"

Marcus laughed at Gideon's expression. "She's not that bad, you know. She has her softer side. I admit that it's not exactly easy to find, but it's there, and this time I'm going to tell her just how I feel about her, and I won't take 'no' for an answer."

Gideon laughed out loud and slapped Marcus on the back. "You go for it, Ranger. I owe a lot to Susan Ivanova. She once helped me out of a bad place. Now I think about it, she even talked about you."

This time it was Marcus' turn to be astonished. "She did? What did she say?"

Gideon smiled gently. "She didn't mention you by name, but she said that a man had once given up his life for her, literally swapped his life for hers." The Captain's face fell into more serious lines. "She said it had taken her years to stop feeling guilty about it. I think she was lying to me. I don't think she ever stopped feeling guilty. Maybe it's time you helped her get over it." With another gentle smile, Gideon stuck out his hand. "I'm glad Angel has another friend."

Marcus took the hand and shook it, saying, "A friend for life. If ever I can do anything to help her, you only have to call."

Gideon nodded and turned to leave. Marcus watched the Captain go, thinking that just maybe he'd made another new friend that day.

Gideon leaned back in his seat and listened as Deborah chatted with Lily and Luke about the party. The Captain hadn't seen his wife so animated about anything for a long time. [Well, not outside the bedroom, anyway.] Deborah's distraction gave him the opportunity to lean toward Angel, who sat next to him, in silence.

The raven haired witch had been quiet ever since they had boarded the shuttle, and Gideon was concerned that she was still tired from her recent adventures. He said quietly, "Are you OK, Angel? Was the party too much for you?"

Angel turned her head and smiled brightly, dispelling all his fears. "I'm fine, Matt. I've done nothing but sleep for the last couple of days, and I'm feeling bright eyed and bushy tailed again. I loved the party, and I'm so glad that Captain Marriot forgave me for bringing Marcus back."

Gideon laughed softly. "Ben's like me. He never can stay mad at a beautiful woman for long."

Angel lowered her eyelids, her long, dark lashes resting on her cheeks for a moment, before she looked up at the Captain again. Gideon saw the twinkle in her bright blue eyes, and knew he was about to be teased. The satisfaction he got from that knowledge was enormous. If Angel was willing to tease him, it meant she'd forgiven him for his bad temper.

Angel's tone was mischievous as she said, "Ben may have forgiven me, but have you, Matt? You should, you know."

Gideon raised an eyebrow and looked down his nose at her, pretending to frown at her impertinence. He knew she wouldn't be fooled for a second, but he enjoyed the banter. "Oh, should I? And why is that, Ms. Denier?"

Angel's smile was full of naughtiness as she said, "Because Marcus saved your life. And mine."

Gideon was genuinely puzzled. Where was she going with this? He had to find out. "And how do you figure that out, Missy? I don't recollect Marcus Cole riding to my rescue on a white charger, or even on a White Star for that matter."

Angel giggled at the image Gideon had evoked, then went on. "If Marcus hadn't saved Susan Ivanova's life, she wouldn't have been there to save you and your ship on the way back to Earth. Then you couldn't have married Demon, you wouldn't have come to Mars, and I would have died there." The teasing tone diminished as she spoke, and by the time Angel finished her sentence, there were tears sparkling in her eyes.

Gideon reached out and patted her arm, absorbing what she had said. She was right. Indirectly, he owed Marcus Cole his life, his marriage and all the happiness he now had. How could he ever repay such a debt? Gideon concluded that he couldn't. All he could do was try to pass on the favor when he got the chance. He sat silently for a while, then patted Angel's arm again.

"I'd already forgiven you, Angel, but thanks for giving me another reason. And thank you for helping Ben. He deserved your help, even if I didn't. Now have you forgiven me for being so bad tempered with you?" He smiled gently, and was delighted to see Angel's face clear, and her smile return.

"Hmm, well first you have to admit that I wasn't so selfish after all." Angel arched an eyebrow and her

eyes twinkled, showing she was teasing again. She went on, "Then I'll think about it. You were very grouchy, Captain. I think you have a lot of work to do, to get back into my good books. But don't worry; I'll think of some things you can do to make it up to me. Lots of things."

Gideon groaned theatrically. "I can see I'm going to be paying for my bad temper for some time to come."

Angel reached up and ran her index finger along his jaw, sending a shiver of pleasure down Gideon's spine.

"For the rest of your life, Captain. And I know it will be a long one."

Day 8 : Marcus Cole's Quarters on Babylon 5 - 10:30 am EST

Marcus stood in front of the comm. unit in his quarters and pondered, pulling gently at his beard. [Maybe I should trim it first. Can't appear in front of the Entil'zha looking like a scruff.] He took his hand away and looked at it. [Hmm, and the fingernails could do with a good trim, too. And maybe I should send all these clothes to the cleaners first. They do need freshening up after ten years in storage. And...]

He clamped down on his mental rambling abruptly. [Oh for heaven's sake, man, stop procrastinating! You know it's the right time of day to get Deleenn on Minbar. Just call her!]

Before he could find another excuse for further delay, Marcus took a deep breath, straightened his spine and put the call through. The minutes ticked by while the connection was established. While he waited, he promised himself he'd call Susan as soon as he arrived on Minbar. If Deleenn would have him back.

The Ranger was just beginning to think that maybe the Entil'zha wasn't available, and maybe he had a reprieve and could put off the call for a little longer. Then the screen cleared, and there was Deleenn's beautiful face.

She looked older than Marcus remembered her. [Well of course she does, stupid! Ten years have passed for her, if not for you.] The lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth did nothing to diminish her beauty in Marcus' eyes. As she caught sight of the Ranger's face, her eyes and mouth opened in shock, but she was unable to speak.

Marcus smiled gently. "Hello, Deleenn. Yes, it's me. Back from the dead. They say you can't keep a good man down, so I guess that means I should have stayed dead, but the universe was feeling contrary. I was wondering if you might have an opening for a resurrected Ranger?"

Day 15 : Minbar

Marcus pondered for a bit. He'd arrived back on Minbar, been accepted back into the Rangers, got himself back up to speed with current events and polished his pike. Now, what was the correct etiquette for calling someone after one died saving her life? [Well, dearest, I'm afraid that there was a big mistake, and I wasn't dead after all. They popped me into the microwave, thawed me for thirty seconds, and here I am!] Frowning, he shook his head. No, no, no! That would never do!

"Where's G'Kar when you need a line that is profoundly deep, spiritual and confusing as hell?" He growled.

Taking a deep breath, he placed the call to Susan Ivanova. As he expected, he got a flunky. Politely, he asked to speak with Susan, and his request was denied. "She's a very busy woman."

"Advise her that the great Vorlon God Booji with a bucket on my head is here. I was dead, and now I'm alive. And I am crying to the heavens. Ni sen vlani en elis vidron."

The flunky had the grace to look amused. "I'm writing this down, though you'll have to spell that Minbari for me. I'm guessing that you're one of her friends from Babylon 5 as they always call with these crazy messages. Either that or you're drunk or maybe you're both."

"I can assure you that I am perfectly sober, but I did serve with her on a White Star out of Babylon 5."

Patiently, he spelled phonetically in Minbari, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

The flunky nodded her head, and asked if there was anything else.

"Tell her that the great Vorlon God Booji wishes to speak with her, and that I will ride my unicorn until I see her again. I wish to offer her a room, with a four poster bed, a canopy and a view of a garden. Advise her that I am claiming victory in my heart, and the universe will follow, if only she will talk to me."

He was placed on hold, then suddenly she was there on the viewscreen, her face full of guilt and sorrow. How he longed to kiss her hair and comfort her in her endless grief.

"Marcus?"

June 2272 - Excalibur

Angel was engrossed in a book when the buzzer sounded, letting her know that someone was at the door. She frowned, wondering who it could be. Her sisters would have linked to her, and she hadn't arranged to see anyone that evening, having decided she wanted a quiet night in, curled up with a good book. She was reading Wuthering Heights—again—her very favorite novel.

Placing the book carefully on the sofa beside her, she stood and walked to the door, calling it to open as she moved. A young Minbari crewman stood in the corridor outside, smiling and holding out a package.

"This is for you. It was delivered by the supply ship we met up with earlier. Sorry it has taken a while to get to you. There was a lot of post to sort." He smiled nervously, and Angel tried to remember his name. [Trelarr. That's it.]

She smiled and took the package, thanking the young Minbari. As the doors closed behind her, she moved back to the sofa, turning the package over in her hands, inspecting it for signs of who had sent it. Angel knew she hadn't ordered anything recently, so she hadn't been expecting any post, but it was definitely for her. Her name was printed in clear letters on the outside.

*Ms. Angelique Denier
Medbay Assistant*

ISASS Excalibur

Underneath, in large block capitals, were the words FRAGILE - HANDLE WITH CARE. The same warning was repeated on every side. Whoever had sent it had wrapped it neatly and carefully.

Angel reached into her shoulder holster and pulled out the stiletto she always kept there, sliding it under the tape that held the package together. She suppressed a little shiver of excitement and anticipation. Angel loved surprises.

Carefully unwrapping the parcel, then opening the box inside, Angel gradually removed all the padding around the contents, and finally found herself holding a small, beautifully modeled, crystal unicorn. He was rearing up, his golden hooves pawing at the air, his golden horn held high, and his golden mane and tail waving in the wind. His tiny eyes were sparkling blue sapphires.

Angel let out a little squeak of delight at the beauty of the tiny gift. So delicate; the crystal captured shafts of light which then glinted off the gilding and the deep blue of his eyes. He was exquisite. [But who sent him?]

Carefully placing the unicorn on the table by the sofa, Angel turned her attention back to the parcel, and found two envelopes in the packaging. One was marked OPEN THIS ONE FIRST. The other was marked OPEN THIS ONE SECOND. The writing was in the same neat clear capitals as had appeared on the outer wrapping. Angel still didn't recognize the hand, but she eagerly ripped open the first envelope. Inside was a brief note.

My dearest Angel,

This is the very last unicorn I was able to capture. I'm afraid I'm no longer qualified to go unicorn hunting, so I thought I should send this little one to my dearest friend to take care of, as his eyes reminded me of yours. His name is Ranger. He's a bit delicate, so be gentle with him, just as you were with me.

All my love (well, all I have to spare)

Marcus

Angel laughed aloud as she read the note. Marcus sounded happy, and it appeared that he had achieved his goal. She turned to the second envelope, noticing that whatever was inside was more rigid than the note. Opening the envelope carefully, Angel tipped a stiff card into her hand, about fifteen centimeters long by ten wide.

It was a picture, but not like the ones Angel remembered from her previous life. This card captured multiple images, each one appearing in turn. There were five pictures in all, and in every one Marcus looked out at her, with the biggest, silliest grin on his face that Angel had ever seen. Because in every picture a handsome, if somewhat severe looking woman stood by his side, smiling, her long dark hair cascading in waves over her shoulders.

Angel laughed and spoke to the picture. "Captain Ivanova I presume? You take care of your Ranger, Captain, as well as I plan to take care of mine."

Angel laid the picture down on the sofa next to her, then picked up her glass unicorn once again. She tilted it back and forth in the light, delighting in the colors reflected by the beautifully cut crystal. After a few moments spent admiring her gift, she said softly, "Well, Ranger. I hope you'll be as happy with me as your namesake is with his Captain. Welcome aboard the Excalibur."

The little unicorn seemed to wink back at her, and suddenly the future seemed to hold more promise of love for Angel than she had felt in a long time.



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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four M

[{Part 1: Awakening}](#)