

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five A - Part 1: A Marriage of Inconvenience

by The Space Witches



A family reunion for a joyous occasion.

Chapter 1

April 2280

Angel lay in Jack's arms, breathing a deep sigh of contentment. The months they had spent alone together on his ship since leaving Eriadne had been the happiest of her life. Even though they sometimes argued, sometimes had tempestuous fights, they always came together again afterwards, united by the deep, abiding love they had for each other. Angel was slowly beginning to believe that she had at last found what she'd always wanted. This was it. This was her happy ever after.

That thought made Angel lift her hand to touch the locket she wore around her neck. It was in the form of a crystal sphere, inside of which was a melted nugget of gold. This was all that remained of the wedding ring her first husband had given her. Michael: the husband Lucas Buck had murdered. Memories of Michael and of Lucas swept through Angel's mind, and for a moment she felt as if her heart would break. Then Jack tightened his arms and held her closer to him, turning his head a little to kiss her forehead.

How had he known she needed to feel his love just then? Angel didn't know, but somehow that was how it always was with her and Jack. They gave each other what they needed most, when

they needed it.

Looking around the cabin in which they lay, Angel smiled. It looked rather different now, compared to when she had first come on board Jack's ship. Then she had found his cabin bare and undecorated. Jack was still a military man at heart and he had traveled light. There had been no ornaments, just a few books, and a wide bunk, made up with rough blankets tucked tightly, with millimeter perfect precision.

Now the cabin was a softer, warmer place, with Angel's favorite tapestry hanging on the wall. It showed her riding a unicorn through flames, with the planet Earth hanging in the dark sky above, and her sisters standing to one side, reminding Angel that she was never really alone. Although she no longer saw her sisters every day, they exchanged messages frequently. A wave of warmth swept through her as Angel remembered how isolated and lonely she'd felt, when Lucas had removed her from contact with her family. All that was now changed, along with other aspects of Jack's ship.



warm and lived in, and a special place was reserved for Ranger, the little crystal unicorn Angel had been given by Marcus Cole.

Glancing at the little unicorn, Angel sighed sadly. She missed Marcus and hadn't given up hope that he was still alive somewhere in the galaxy, just lost, but one day he would find his way home.

Home. That was another word that made Angel smile. This ship was now home. Angel had known many places in her life she had called by that name for a while, but she knew deep down that she had truly arrived at her final home. It didn't matter that this was a trading ship, crisscrossing space as she and Jack carried goods from one place to another. It was still home. To reinforce the point, Jack had renamed the ship when Angel had joined him, registering the new name with the authorities on Mars, the home port out of which the newly titled 'Angel's Rest' now flew.

Angel smiled to herself as she remembered her delight when Jack had suggested the new name. When they had sent in the registration details, they had made sure that the apostrophe in the title was properly recorded, laughing to themselves as they wondered whether anyone else would notice the significance. This wasn't a ship where many angels came to rest. It was the place where one Angel had truly found peace.

Turning her head, Angel kissed Jack's shoulder, reveling in the warmth and comfort of his

arms. Physically, he strongly resembled Lucas, but in every other way, Jack was completely his own man. One significant difference between the two men was the way they liked to sleep. Lucas had always preferred to roll on his side and sleep back to back after having sex. That was when he didn't get out of bed, dress, and go about whatever mysterious business he was engaged in at the time.

Jack liked to hold Angel after they had made love. He liked to feel her softness against him, stroking her skin and her hair, breathing in the scent of her. Angel had teased him that sometimes she thought he would like to eat her if he could. Jack had smiled sadly and told her that he had missed her for every moment of the six and half years they had been apart. He was making up for all those nights he had slept alone, thinking of her, wanting her, but staying away.

One of their earliest discussions--when they had finally become capable of coherent speech after their passionate reunion on Eriadne--had been about Jack's reasons for staying in hiding for so long. It had transpired that Jack had seen Angel in the early days of her acting career. He had followed her activities in the media, and when he'd heard she was sick, at the end of '74, he had set out for Earth to be with her. He'd arrived just in time to hear the news of her marriage to Michael Healy.

Jack had been devastated, but had told himself that what he really wanted was Angel's happiness, so he had gritted his teeth, and left Earth without ever telling anyone he had been there. Even Demon had never known, although Jack had kept the promise he'd made to Angel's sister all those years before, and had always made sure she could contact him.

Jack had continued to follow Angel's career, and he'd been heart-broken for her when he'd heard the news of Michael's death. He'd considered going back to Earth again at that time, but decided in the end that it might appear as if he were trying to take advantage of her grief. So he'd held back and stayed away, getting whatever information he could about Angel's activities from the media and occasional messages from Demon.

The message he had received in late '76 had almost destroyed him. The news that Angel had gone back to Lucas Buck--the man who had hurt her so badly, the man whose name alone had been powerful enough to smash apart his burgeoning relationship with Angel--had left Jack seething with anger and frustration. In his travels over the next three years he had constantly sought news of Angel and Lucas, but had discovered nothing.

Then he had gotten the call from Demon. The call he had secretly hoped to receive for over six years, but had never dared believe would really come. Demon had called Jack and told him that Angel needed him.

It had taken weeks for the message to find him, but he'd set out at once, pushing his ship's engines to their limit, because he'd heard the fear and desperation in Demon's voice. The fact that Demon had allowed her emotions to show was a clear sign to Angel that her sister trusted this man completely, and it also showed just how desperately afraid for her sister Demon must have been.

The memories of the first few moments when Jack had arrived in the library on Eriadne were among the happiest of Angel's life. She had been incoherent with joy, unable to say more than two words before she had fallen into Jack's arms, kissing him passionately, crying and

laughing, touching him all over, his hair, his face, his lean body, everything she could reach. They had ripped the clothes off each other and made love on the floor of the library, completely oblivious to any risk of being interrupted.

Angel smiled to herself as she thought that a herd of elephants could have stampeded through the library at that point, and probable they wouldn't have noticed. After nearly seven long years apart, she and Jack had been far too absorbed with rediscovering the joys of each others' bodies to notice anything around them.

The days that had followed had been bliss. They had talked, loved, laughed and cried. They had both known that they belonged together, and that they would never be parted again. Jack had described his life to Angel, concerned that she would want something more settled than a life aboard a trading ship, traveling the stars wherever opportunity took them. Angel had dismissed his fears, telling him that it sounded wonderful. She had tried living on several different planets around the galaxy, and she had found happiness on none of them. Perhaps it was time to try something different.

So they had loaded all the things that Angel wanted to keep onto Jack's ship, said goodbye to Angel's friends on Eriadne, and set out on a new life together. Angel had sent messages to her sisters and received rapturous responses. They were all delighted that she had found happiness at last.

There had been a little twinkle in Demon's eye when she had sent her message wishing them all the happiness in the universe for their future together. In a separate message for Jack, Demon had told him that he shouldn't have been so stubborn about staying hidden for so long, but that she was getting used to the Gideon mulish streak. After ten years of marriage to Matthew, she'd had enough practice dealing with it.

Matt's message to Angel had been short and tinged with sadness. He too had wished her happiness, but told her he would miss her. The look in Matt's eyes as he'd said that had made Angel's heart lurch. A small part of her would never stop loving Matt, just as she would never stop loving Michael.

And despite everything, a piece of her heart would always belong to Lucas.

Angel clutched at her locket again, trying to push aside thoughts of Lucas and Gabriel, but it was hard not to wonder where they were and what they were doing. Was her son growing healthy and strong? Gabriel was now ten months old; would he be starting to pull himself up onto his feet yet? Or was he still crawling? Did he smile when he saw his father? Who was taking care of him?

Biting her lip, Angel forced back the tears that threatened whenever she thought about her son. She took a deep breath and buried her head into Jack's shoulder, telling herself it was pointless thinking about Gabriel. It only made her unhappy.

As if sensing her distress, Jack roused from his sleep. Tightening his arms around Angel again, he opened his eyes and looked down at her, whispering blearily, "Are you, OK? What's wrong?"

Angel looked up at him and smiled, snuggling closer and winding her legs around his, loving the feel of his long, lean body pressed against hers. "Nothing's wrong. Go back to sleep."

Jack's warm hazel eyes narrowed and he gave her a long, close look. "I'm awake now, and there *is* something wrong. You're holding your locket, and you only do that when you're upset."

Soon after their reunion, Angel had told Jack what her crystal locket contained. She had been worried that he wouldn't like her wearing such an intimate reminder of her dead husband. She needn't have been concerned. Jack had smiled and told her that he didn't feel threatened by her memories of Michael. She remembered Jack's words clearly. "I'm glad he was able to make you happy, even if it was only for a short time. If he loved you as much as I do, he's happy for you right now, knowing that you have someone to love you again."

Looking up into Jack's eyes, Angel could see that love shining through the concern she could see there. It warmed her and made her feel safe in a way she hadn't felt since Michael had died. She shook her head gently and said, "I was just thinking about everything we have together, and I was telling Michael how happy I am now." It wasn't entirely a lie, and she didn't want to explain her thoughts about Lucas and Gabriel.

Jack smiled and lifted his hand to cover hers, closing it around the locket. He lay in silence for a while then said, "There's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time, and I guess this is as good a time as any. You know I don't mind you wearing the locket, and I don't mind you thinking about Michael, and I know that a part of you still loves him and always will, and that's OK, but there's one thing I have a problem with, one thing that gets to me, and I know it shouldn't matter but it does, and I'm saying this all wrong, and I'm being stupid, so maybe I'll just shut up and forget it. Forget it, OK? Forget I ever said anything."

Angel blinked at the rush of words that poured from Jack's mouth. She couldn't work out what was driving them. He didn't seem angry, or even upset. If she hadn't known better she would have said he seemed nervous. But Jack was never nervous. Nothing frightened the Gideons. Well, nothing they ever allowed anyone else to see, anyway. For a moment, Angel wished she had Demon's powers, thinking how wonderful it must be to know exactly what other people were feeling.

Sitting upright, Angel gently pushed Jack onto his back then looked down at him, frowning. "Tell me what's bothering you. What's this thing that gets to you? What is it that you have a problem with?"

Jack lay back with his arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling of the cabin. The covers had slipped down around his hips, and Angel found it hard not to be distracted by the soft hair covering his lean chest, his flat belly, and the dark line of hair that led down beneath the covers. If she just moved the sheet the tiniest bit with her mind...

Angel pushed the temptation aside and waited for Jack to speak. Eventually he sighed deeply and shifted his gaze. Reaching up, he touched Angel's locket where it rested between her breasts, lifting it carefully and looking closely at the gold nugget inside.

When he spoke, his voice was full of sadness. "This may only be a small lump of gold now, but it was once much more than that. Before it was melted, it was the ring Michael gave you when you were married. It was the symbol of your commitment to each other. It told the world that you intended to be together forever. I know it's stupid, but I want that, too. I want the universe to be able to see that we belong to each other, and that nothing will ever break us apart. I want what Michael had. I want you to be my wife. Angelique, will you marry me?"

Angel felt as if the breath had been knocked from her body. She'd had no idea that Jack felt that way. Why hadn't he told her? Why had he waited for months, worrying about it? He could have asked her within minutes of their meeting again, and her answer would have been the same.

"Yes. Yes, of course I'll marry you, Jack. Why did you wait so long to ask?"

Jack lay with his arms around Angelique, smiling to himself, wondering how he could have gotten quite so lucky. Had all the bad karma he'd suffered in his own universe somehow built up a store of good stuff in his future? Was that how the universe kept score? Bad things had to be balanced by good things? Then God knows, Jack Gideon was overdue for the good parts.

The last few years of his life in his own universe had been a living hell, in which he'd lost everyone he cared about, failed in the most important mission of his life, and cost nine billion people their lives through his failure. Jack was never sure why he had been allowed to survive after all that. Shouldn't the price for such failure have been death?

But it seemed that the universe had plans for the man who had then been known as Matthew Gideon. Plans that hadn't involved letting him off easy by allowing him to die. No, the universe had decided that it wanted to play with Matt Gideon, like a cat playing with a mouse, teasing and torturing him until death seemed like a mercy, until he was close to choosing to die at his own hand.

That was the point Gideon had reached, opting to stay and die with his ship, when a hole had opened in space and sucked him through into a different world and a different life. No longer Matt Gideon, but Jack, the first thing the new universe had done was to take his very name away from him, then it had decided to torture him some more. It had offered him something he had never dreamed possible--a loving relationship with a beautiful woman--then it had snatched it all away.

Jack had fled the Excalibur and built a new life for himself, alone. For six and a half years, he had worked and played, ate and drank, slept and lay awake staring at the ceiling of his cabin, and he had done all those things alone. Starting with the credits he'd got for the books Demon had given him, he'd finally earned and won enough credits to buy his own ship, a small ship but big enough to have her own jump engines, giving Jack the freedom to travel wherever he chose. But even with the spare cabins on his ship, he still chose to travel alone when he could.

When he'd needed help, he'd hired crew for short periods, one job at a time. No long term relationships, no friendships, and--God forbid--no love has been allowed to enter Jack Gideon's solitary hell. The hell of his own making and the hell he deserved; a small penance to pay for all the mistakes he had made, all the pain he had caused and all the lives lost because of his failure.

Jack had been a fugitive from the Minbari, running and hiding, never staying still. His only link to any sense of normality was through the woman who had helped him from the moment he'd awoken in this universe: the so inappropriately named Demon.

He had promised Demon that he would always leave her a way to make contact with him, and he'd kept his promise. Periodically he had sent her new contact points, new ways to

communicate with him if she needed to. The messages he had received from her had been rare and concise. Every few months a brief communication would arrive, confirming that she had his details, usually including some brief comments about her family. She'd told him about the birth of her second child, but she'd never mentioned the Technomage's attack that had preceded that event. Jack had only learned those details later.

Then one day a message came that Jack had watched over and over again, hardly daring to believe that what he was hearing could be real. Demon had called for his help. She had begged him to go to Eriadne and help her sister. When he'd watched the recording, Jack had been startled to see Demon weeping with fear for Angelique's mental and physical well-being. The cool, calm manner that Demon had always maintained had disintegrated under the weight of her concern. The words with which her message had ended were forever etched in Jack's mind:

"Please, Jack, I know Angel hurt you, but please, can you forgive her? She's lost so much and she's hurting so badly, and there's nothing I can do to help or heal her. She doesn't need me; she doesn't need anything I can give her. What she needs is something I pray you can give her. She needs to be loved."



When Jack had seen the date on the message he had almost panicked. It had taken weeks to find him. He had been terrified that he might be too late. Fortunately, he'd been traveling alone at the time, not needing crew to help him with the cargo he'd been carrying. So he'd changed course instantly and set out for Eriadne as fast as he could push his ship's engines.

The days it had taken to get there had been excruciating. Jack had been convinced that Angelique would have succumbed to despair and killed herself before he could get to her. He'd almost crashed his ship in his haste to land, and he'd ran up into the castle, screaming at the people he'd come across to tell him where Angelique was. The startled Brakiri had pointed the way, and Jack had realized later that they hadn't questioned him because they'd thought he was the Matt Gideon who had visited their planet before.

He'd arrived at the doors of the library and paused for breath, reassured that at least Angelique was still alive. The Brakiri would have told him if she were gone. When he'd finally gotten his breathing under control, and suppressed the wave of nervous fear that had nearly made him turn and run away again, he'd opened the great doors quietly, and entered silently, looking around the huge, round room, wondering where Angelique might be.

A movement of shadow against light had drawn his attention to the window, and at last he had seen her, silhouetted against the brightness. He'd called her name softly, and she'd turned, allowing him to see her face for the first time in all those years. She'd hardly changed at all. Still as beautiful as ever, but somehow more mature, and her eyes had been filled with sadness at first. Then when she'd realized who it was who stood before her, those crystal blue eyes had

widened in astonishment. Somehow she had known at once who he was, realizing instantly that he wasn't her brother-in-law.

Jack had no idea what he'd said next. He was convinced that he'd bumbled senselessly, but somehow it hadn't mattered. Somehow, Angelique had heard what his heart had wanted to say, even if his mouth had garbled the message. When his incoherent rambling had finally stuttered to a halt, he'd begged her to speak, and the words she had spoken were the most beautiful sounds Jack Gideon had ever heard.

"Hello, Jack."

Jack remembered a time in his own universe when Galen had spoken of his love for Isabelle, saying that she'd only needed one word to make him fall in love with her. That word had been 'hello'. Well, Angelique wasn't a Technomage, so it had taken her two words to steal Jack's heart and soul all over again.

"Hello, Jack."

That was all it had taken.

And now Jack Gideon was the happiest man in the universe. Angelique had asked a good question when she had accepted his proposal. Why had it taken him so long? He could have asked her at any time during the months they had spent together, getting to know each other again, learning about each others' lives during the time they had spent apart.

Jack had already known about the period Angelique had spent as an actress, and he knew that she had abandoned that career to go back to Lucas Buck, but when he'd learned all that had happened to her during that time, he had wanted to hold her and protect her from the universe every moment for the rest of their lives. Why had he hesitated so long?

One of his reasons was because he had still been a fugitive, and he hadn't wanted to tie Angelique to a life on the run. That had been resolved earlier in the year when Matt Gideon had pulled strings, called in favors, twisted arms and applied judicious blackmail in the appropriate quarters. The result had been a lifting of the warrant for Jack's detention that had been issued by the Minbari Warriors.

Gideon had also arranged for Jack to be issued with citizenship papers and a passport from Mars. Jack had no idea how Matt had done it, but he knew why. Not for his doppelganger of course. Matt would never be sentimental about his alternate self, and would have quite happily left him to his own devices as he had done for years. No, Matt Gideon had done what he had done for Angelique's sake, so she wouldn't have to live with a wanted, stateless man.

So with that issue resolved why had Jack still hesitated? Had he been so insecure about Angelique's love for him? He had held her at night when she'd had nightmares, and screamed out Lucas Buck's name. This time he hadn't allowed his jealousy of her feelings for Lucas to get in the way of their relationship. This time, he knew that while a part of Angelique would always be tied to Lucas, she was no longer possessed by him. She had fought her way free of him, and paid a terrible price for that freedom. It wasn't her feelings for Lucas that stood in their way.

Jack dropped his head and kissed Angelique's forehead as she slept in his arms, deciding that it

was just his own stupidity that had kept him from asking for so long. Well, at least he'd stopped being stupid in the end. After she had agreed to become his wife, he and Angelique had made love again, slowly, passionately, pouring out their love for each other into the physical act of union, bringing them closer to each other than they had ever felt before.

Angelique had fallen asleep quickly afterwards, while Jack lay awake, going over his memories and questioning himself, all the while feeling somewhat incredulous at how lucky he had been.

Angelique was going to be his wife. Nothing else really mattered. All other questions were irrelevant. All that mattered was that they would soon be married to each other, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as they both would live.

"We're going to have to wait awhile. I know that."

Jack mumbled around a mouthful of toast. Years of military training still made him rise early, and it had become his habit to prepare breakfast for the two of them while Angelique slept on. He would take a tray into their cabin, and place it at the side of the bed, waking Angelique with a kiss, then pouring her coffee and sharing the food with her. For some reason, most days he ended up back in bed with her, making love before they finally got up and shared a shower.

The Angel's Rest may have been a small ship, but she was big enough to carry large water tanks, and careful recycling meant that while Jack and Angelique shared the ship alone, there was just enough hot water for one real water shower each day. That luxury wouldn't be available if they took on a larger crew, as Jack was regretfully concluding they should, if they were to build on the successful start they had made in trading luxury goods across a range of planets.

Angelique sighed and reached out to stroke his hair, sending a little shiver of desire coursing through Jack's body.

"Do you mind? I really would like all my family to be there, and it will take some organizing to get them all in one place at the same time."

Jack swallowed his toast, took a gulp of coffee then lifted Angelique's hand and kissed it, before smiling and saying, "I want as many people there as possible. I want the whole universe to know that Angelique Denier has consented to marry Mat...Jack Gideon, and that they plan to spend the rest of their lives together."

Angelique frowned at his slip of the tongue. Even after all these years, sometimes Jack forgot his new name. Old habits died hard. Before she could comment, Jack rushed on, "Anyway, it will be good to see John again. And Max and Dureena, too. I know they're not *my* John, Max and Dureena, but it will be good to see them anyway. And Sarah. Especially Sarah."

Jack closed his eyes as he remembered how his friends in his own universe had died. He sent silent thanks to the God he thought had forsaken him that this universe was different. Then he smiled and winked.

"And from what you've told me, it will irritate the hell out of Matt to have Max around, so

that will make it even more worth waiting for."

Angelique laughed, and reached out to slap Jack's arm playfully. Jack caught her hand and pulled her into his arms, with the inevitable result that the coffee was cold by the time they got around to pouring another cup.

June 2280

Gideon stood at the bedroom window looking out into the darkness, his mind as restless as the sea he could just make out in the light of the new moon. In a couple of days he would be leaving his home in England to take his family back to Eriadne, the planet where his son had been born and where Gideon had nearly died. The place where his life had been saved by a man he detested and despised; a man he had sworn to kill if they ever crossed paths again. The place where he had found the woman he adored, who had become his wife, and the place where later he had lost another woman he loved.

Eriadne was a place that evoked complex mixed feelings in Gideon. Returning there after all this time would hardly be comfortable, and to make things worse, he was going to have to watch as one of the women he loved married another man.

The retired Captain really wasn't sure whether it made it better or worse that Jack Gideon wasn't entirely another man, but was nearly identical to himself. For many years their lives had followed identical tracks. Their childhoods had been the same, and their adult years had been indistinguishable until the time of the very first visit to Eriadne. Most of the things that had happened to Matthew Gideon to make him the man he was had also happened to Jack Gideon. It was only in recent years that their paths had diverged. Had that divergence been sufficient to make Jack Gideon a different man? Or was he the same double-talking, suspicious, second-guessing individual who Matthew Gideon saw every time he looked in the mirror?

These were the questions that kept Gideon awake into the early hours of the morning, staring out into the night, trying to come to terms with what was going to happen in two weeks time. He had tried to distract himself with thoughts of how good it would be to see John again. They were meeting up on Minbar, then Delenn had given her permission for the Excalibur and her crew to make their way to Eriadne for a week's shore leave. Gideon gritted his teeth when he remembered that the Excalibur would be carrying more than John, Lily, Luke and their children. Also on board would be Deborah's youngest sister, Ilas, her children and her partners, Dureena Nafeel and Max Eilerson.

Gideon and Max hadn't exchanged more than a few chilly words in years. The last time they had met in person had been at the time of Angel's marriage to her first husband, Michael Healy. Gideon had no great desire to meet Max again, but he had little choice, as Angel had wanted all her sisters present to witness her marriage to Jack Gideon. So the Excalibur had diverted to pick up Max, Dureena, Ilas and their two children from the planet where they had been carrying out their latest excavation. Gideon half-wished Delenn hadn't been quite so generous in allowing that detour.

Thinking of Delenn shifted Gideon's thoughts to something else that troubled him. John Sheridan had refused to stand for re-election to the Presidency of the ISA earlier that year, insisting that Delenn take his place. The total respect, bordering on reverence, accorded to the

Minbari leader had made her election as the new President a certainty, and Gideon had no qualms about working for her, but he was disturbed by Sheridan's reasons for standing down.

Years before, Deborah had told Gideon about her discussion with Delenn, when the Minbari woman had revealed that Sheridan's life-span was strictly limited. Gideon had quietly investigated afterwards, and had discovered that when Sheridan had 'died' at the end of 2260, the mysterious being, Lorien, had given some of his life-force to bring Sheridan back to life. That force had provided Gideon's hero with an extra twenty years of life. It was now the middle of 2280, so John Sheridan's time was now fast running out.

The thought of his hero and friend dying left Gideon feeling sad and lost. Men like Sheridan weren't supposed to die of old age. They shouldn't fade into silence, like an old clock running down. They should go out in a blaze of glory, performing some heroic act. Definitely with a bang, not with a whimper. Gideon hoped that Sheridan would find a way to end his life as heroically as he'd lived it.

All these thoughts distracted Gideon, and he wasn't aware of his wife's breathing having changed from the soft snore that indicated she was deeply asleep. Consequently, he was startled when Deborah's deep, soft voice said quietly, "Come back to bed."

He turned and saw her getting out of bed, her slim, naked form pale in the darkness. Shaking his head he said, "Go back to sleep. I won't be long."

Deborah ignored him and came to stand by his side, placing her arm around his waist and leaning her head on his shoulder as she stood next to him, gazing out of the window into the night. After a few moments, she sighed and said, "I know this is difficult for you, but it means a lot to Angel to have us all there with her."

At that moment, Gideon wasn't sure whether it was a good or bad thing to be married to an empath who knew what he was feeling, but it certainly saved time having to explain. Deborah had obviously picked up on his inner turmoil, and attributed it to the obvious cause: his conflicted emotions about Angel's marriage.



Sighing deeply, Gideon turned to his wife and pulled her into his arms, then kissed her gently on the forehead. The soft moonlight made her hair look more silver than pale gold, and Gideon buried his face into the soft mass, breathing deeply, taking in the scent of his wife, as his hands roved over her soft, warm skin. He started to relax as Deborah sent waves of calming love washing over him. Her empathic powers were not as strong as they had once been, but she could still send her emotions when she wanted.

After a few moments, Gideon kissed her again and whispered, "Why aren't you mad at me? Any other woman would be seriously pissed with her husband if she discovered he had strong feelings for her sister." That was the nearest he could get to expressing his love for Angel.

Deborah looked up at him and he could just make out her smile in the moonlight shining through the window. "Well, first of all, I'm not any other woman. I'm me. Unique. Remember

that."

Gideon laughed and pulled her close, running his hands down her back to her butt, and squeezing gently.

Deborah rubbed her groin against his then went on more seriously, "And second, being an empath, I can feel what you're feeling. Not just for Angel, but for your family. I know you love Angel, but I also know how much you love me and the children, and the strength of your loyalty to us. I know you would never betray us in any way that matters, and I know you'll never leave us. So I don't feel threatened by your feelings for Angel. I just wish I could make you feel happier about her marrying Jack. He's a good man, Matthew, and I know he can make her happy."

Gideon stood in silence for a while, wanting to believe her, but uncertain. Deborah was biased about Jack Gideon. She thought he strongly resembled the husband she adored in more ways than just his looks. Gideon was less sanguine. He knew his own dark side, and he was sure that Jack had those negative traits, too. But for now there was nothing he could do about it so he sighed again and said, "I hope you're right. I guess I worry because I know how much I've hurt you at times, and I know Jack is very like me. If he ever hurts Angel like I've hurt you, I'll..."

Before Gideon could finish his sentence his words were blocked by Deborah's lips. She lifted her hands to his head and pulled him down into the kiss, deepening it, gently pressing his mouth open with hers. Gideon found himself responding, becoming aroused by the kiss and by her body pressing against his.

When Deborah finally lifted her lips from his she whispered softly, "If Jack loves Angel half as much as you love me, and if he makes her half as happy as you've made me, then she'll be the second luckiest woman in the universe. Now come back to bed and make me happy again."

Gideon laughed, then stooped and swept his wife into his arms, striding across the room and dropping her onto the bed, before throwing himself on top of her and pinning her to the mattress. Deborah squealed in mock protest then quieted as Gideon started touching her in all the places he knew would arouse her.

When he finally lifted himself onto his arms, ready to enter her, Gideon looked down into Deborah's pale face and said the only words that remained in his head after all the previous tumultuous thoughts had been swept away.

"I love you."

7th July 2280

The shaft of pain that swept through the Technomage's body was nearly strong enough to make him scream. He gritted his teeth to hold back the cries, arching his back to try and relieve the stabbing, searing, burning agony that penetrated his spine and turned his legs to jelly. While the pain lasted he couldn't think coherently, couldn't see or hear, couldn't conquer the spasms that wracked his body, sending him into uncontrollable convulsions.

When it finally passed, Galen found himself curled on the floor of his ship, the control globe glowing softly in the corner where it had rolled from his shaking hands, casting the only light in the dimness of the central cabin.

The Mage gasped for breath, bringing himself back under control as he decided that the latest spasm had been the worst yet. He was getting worse, and there was no hope of recovery or improvement. There was no hope left in his life at all. The words he had once spoken to Dureena Nafeel came back to haunt him.

"There's always hope, because it's the one thing nobody's figured out how to kill yet."

He'd been such a naive fool when he'd spouted that pompous nonsense. Hope could be killed, like every other positive thing in the universe. Hope, love, friendship--all could be destroyed with little thought or effort. The things that were hard to kill were the things that remained behind: despair, hatred, enmity and hopelessness. Those were the things that remained in Galen's life. Darkness ruled supreme, and there remained no possibility of light. No hope for the future.

The Technomage pulled himself slowly to his knees and crawled to the seat from which he'd thrown himself in his agonized frenzy. If he'd still had his staff he could have used it to help lift himself to his feet, but his staff was long gone, along with everything else that was good. It had been destroyed on the day when Galen had lost the last positive things in his life.

And all for nothing. He hadn't even succeeded in the mission for which he'd sacrificed so much. The witch had lived and still lived. Even the witch daughter she had carried at the time had survived. Mother and daughter had recovered from the damage Galen had inflicted, mainly due to the efforts of the Mage Galen had once thought of as a friend: Alwyn.

As Galen settled himself back into his chair, he lifted his hand and beckoned shakily. The control sphere lifted slowly from the floor and drifted toward him. That simple summoning now took all of Galen's strength. Without the sphere he would not even have been able to control his ship.

There had been a time when he could move the ship around the universe with his mind alone, but those days were long gone. To perform those feats a Technomage needed complete harmony with the nanomites that infested his body, and complete control over the implants integrated into his nervous system. Galen now had neither.

The nanomites were dying off and the few remaining could barely maintain the hormonal balance required to prevent the implants from poisoning him. The implants themselves were being rejected by his body, breaking down and misfiring in ways which produced the searing spasms of agony that periodically overcame the Mage.

Galen was dying and he knew it. He just wished it could be quicker and less painful.

He had considered flying his ship into a sun, but he hadn't yet been able to bring himself to destroy the only good thing left in his life. His ship was his home, his refuge, and his only remaining friend. When every other being in the universe had deserted him, his ship had stayed faithful.

Galen ran through the names of those who had betrayed him and found the list too long and

painful to complete. It began with his parents, who had died stupidly when he was young, deserting him when he had needed them most. His teacher had told him they had died bravely, but it had been a lie and Galen still hated them for leaving him.

Then Elric, his mentor and most beloved teacher, had died soon after they had arrived at the hiding place. Without Elric to guide him, Galen had felt lost and confused, trying to find his own way in the universe, fighting the Shadows who had once been the benefactors of his kind, helping John Sheridan, a man who had once carried part of the great enemy, a Vorlon.

It was all so confusing, and Galen shook his head free of the memories, trying to separate good from bad, loyalty from betrayal, but it all merged together in his mind, impossible to break apart. He couldn't even bring himself to think about the loss of his one true love, Isabelle, who had given her life to save him, so instead he thought about the time when he had believed he might have found real friends and a home at last. He thought about the Excalibur and Matthew Gideon, the man whose life he had saved more than once, the man he had thought of as his friend.

Gideon had become the greatest traitor of them all, when he had married a witch, falling in love with a woman who also carried part of a Vorlon in her head. The other friends on board the Excalibur had also betrayed Galen in their various ways. Dureena Nafeel had wanted to become Galen's apprentice, until she too had fallen under the malign influence of one of the witches of Eriadne. The little Zanderi had shown great promise until she had joined in partnership with Ilas and Max Eilerson, even allowing herself to be impregnated by the Vorlon enhanced shape-shifter.

Galen had tried to put aside his deep disgust at the idea of Dureena carrying the spawn of a Vorlon polluted being in her belly, and had helped with the birth, but even that hadn't been enough. Even Dureena had turned against him in the end.

Thinking of the birth of Dureena's child brought his mind to the other traitors, Sarah Chambers and Alwyn. They had both been present, and Galen had saved Alwyn's life, after the older Mage had foolishly given too much of his strength in keeping Dureena and her child alive through the pregnancy.

How had that favor been repaid? Had Alwyn felt indebted to his younger colleague for the gift of his life? Apparently not. Alwyn hadn't hesitated to attack Galen, destroying his staff and source of power when he had been weakened by Angel's attack.

Memories of the terrible day when his bonds to his friends had been annihilated, along with much of his power, gave Galen nearly as much pain as his malfunctioning implants. They hadn't understood. They hadn't allowed him to explain why it was so necessary for Demon to die. Why couldn't they see the evil? Why couldn't they understand the danger of allowing such an abomination to exist?

Demon carried part of a Vorlon inside her. It was the sole remaining representative of the older races on this side of the Rim, and its existence meant that the universe was unbalanced. It was light without shadow, energy without entropy, and it could not be allowed to exist. It was evil epitomized and had to be destroyed.

But they hadn't understood and Angel had come home too soon. Only Angel could have stopped him at that point. Only she had the powers to halt Galen in his course. Not only because of

her formidable mental armory, but because Galen still loved her. He would have struck back at anyone else who might have attacked him at that point, obliterating them, before returning to his task of killing the witch. But he couldn't bring himself to hurt Angel, so he had been uniquely vulnerable to her attack, defenseless against her fury.

When she had flung him across the kitchen he had been momentarily stunned, but had soon gathered himself, and risen from the wreckage of the table, ready to explain to the raven haired beauty why his actions were necessary. But she hadn't given him chance. She hadn't wanted to listen to the voice of reason. Angel had attacked before he had even had the opportunity to speak, surprising him with her strength and ferocity.

Her first act had taken Galen by surprise, and weakened him significantly. She had used her mental powers to snatch away his staff, thereby depriving him of the main source of his strength. While it wasn't necessary for the Mage to physically touch his staff to draw on it, having it snatched away so abruptly had left him vulnerable and weakened.

Galen had summoned a fireball to defend himself, but he hadn't wanted to release it, hadn't wanted to hurt the beautiful woman who had stood in front of him, refusing to listen to him and lost to her anger. He had implored her, but she had remained deaf to his pleas. They had reached a stalemate, with Angel unable to do more than hold Galen motionless, while he was unwilling to kill the woman he still loved.

The final attack had come from an unexpected source, and represented the greatest betrayal of all. Only another Technomage could have hurt Galen so badly, and only a Mage of great power. Unfortunately, Alwyn had that power, and had used it to pervert the energy of his own and Galen's staff, attacking the weakened younger man, in concert with his familiar, the dragon.

Galen lifted his hand and touched the deep scores in his face, the marks left by Ishtar's talons. They had never healed properly and the scars remained to permanently disfigure the Mage.

The combination of witch, traitor Technomage and dragon, all attacking at once, had been too much for Galen, and he had succumbed. A part of him wished they had killed him there and then. It would have spared him from the years of agony that had followed. Alwyn's attack and the destruction of Galen's staff had seriously damaged the younger Mage's nervous system and implants. He had known he was badly hurt as he had crawled back to his ship and ordered it to take him away from Earth, but the full significance of his injuries only became apparent later.

Galen had rested in his ship, letting it take him back to the planet where his people remained hidden from the universe, waiting for the day when it would become safe for them to reveal themselves once more. Never having been privy to the debates of the inner circle, Galen had often wondered whether they had been aware that a single Vorlon remained on this side of the Rim, and if that had been part of his people's reason for remaining hidden for so long after the end of the Shadow war. Not that it mattered. The circle had refused to answer any questions he'd tried to ask.

His ship had traveled slowly to the place of hiding, limping through hyperspace without the strong, sure hand of her master on the helm. Galen had drifted in and out of delirium, unable to tend to his own wounds, or to the ship's repeated requests for instructions.

The journey had taken weeks, and in that time much damage had been done. Galen's face had healed, but the scars were too deep to be reversed without the use of the abominable regenerator technology left behind by the Vorlons. Galen refused to submit himself to such vile instruments. He preferred to remain disfigured.

The delay had also allowed Alwyn sufficient time to send details of the attack to the Technomage council. Of course, the older Mage's version of events had been twisted to suit his own purposes, emphasizing the defenselessness of the pregnant woman whom Galen had attacked.

Vainly, Galen had begged the council to understand the necessity for Demon's death. He had been sure they would understand the need for the removal of the last remaining trace of the Vorlons from the galaxy. He had convinced himself that they would applaud his actions in trying to remove their last reason for remaining in hiding. But somehow Alwyn had influenced the council against him. They had cast him out, this time banishing him completely, and forbidding him from ever returning to the hiding place. They had even reprogrammed Galen's ship, preventing it from ever following the correct currents and twists of hyperspace, so he could never go home.



At the time, Galen had considered himself lucky that he hadn't been flayed; the traditional punishment for a Mage who seriously transgressed. That would have involved the removal of all his implants, and his immediate death as a result. In the months that had followed, Galen had found that the sentence of banishment had been more severe than he had first thought. Initially, he had been in defiant mood, screaming at the council that he didn't need them, that he could live without the support of his brethren.

He had been wrong.

When his implants had first started to malfunction, Galen had thought he could treat himself, using the healing technology of his ship to correct the imbalances created in his body. He had been wrong about that, too. Without an external source of nanomites, the hormonal imbalance had gotten steadily worse, and the real pain had begun. As months, then years had passed, the agony became more frequent and had gotten stronger. While flaying would have involved a quick and relatively painless death, banishment was a long drawn out agonizing descent into oblivion.

Galen now knew that there was no hope for him. His only chance of recovery lay in the Technomage place of hiding, and that place was barred to him. There was no road home, long or short. The only powers remaining to him were those of destruction. Galen could still create fireballs, could still destroy, but he could no longer heal, and he could certainly not heal himself.

The Mage had spent the intervening years searching for an alternative solution to his problem, not knowing whether to laugh or cry at the irony of his situation. Once he had helped the crew

of the Excalibur, his friends, to search for a cure for the plague that threatened all life on Earth. Now he searched for his own cure, and he searched alone.

The sound that emerged from Galen's mouth could have been a harsh laugh or a groan of pain, and there was no one to know or care about the difference.

"Ship, display current position." Galen whispered the words, not having the strength to project his usual sonorous tones.

A three-dimensional map appeared in the space in front of him, and Galen realized that at some time during his latest attack of pain, the ship had dropped from hyperspace. The surrounding stars looked familiar and this time Galen laughed harshly when he recognized his location.

He was near to the place where it had all begun to go wrong. He was within a few days' travel of Eriadne, the planet where the witches had once lived.

About to instruct the ship to take him away from that cursed place, a sudden thought stopped Galen in his tracks. Eriadne had not only been the home of the witches, nor had it only been a place where the Vorlons had lived and worked. Long before the Vorlons or the witches had lived there, it had been a Shadow world. Shadow slave races had lived and worked there, and it was in one of their bases that Max Eilerson had found the information that had led finally, step by painful step, to a cure for the Drakh plague.

Galen wondered if there might be more information to be found in those Shadow ruins on Eriadne. Perhaps even a cure for a sick Technomage, who had run out of other places to go.

"Ship, set course for Eriadne. Best speed."

The Mage lay back in his chair, careful not to press against the inflamed sores on his back where his flesh was trying to reject his implants. Perhaps hope wasn't quite dead after all.

Angel sat in the co-pilot's seat, barely able to contain her excitement as the ship, Angel's Rest, descended through the atmosphere of Eriadne. The planet below was a mixture of brown and green, peeking through the puffy white clouds that swirled above the mountainous landscape. The ship was still too high to see details, but from a quick glance at the viewscreen in front of the pilot's position, Angel could see that they were flying directly down to the location of the castle that had previously been her home.

Home. Eriadne had twice been that to her, and she had experienced some of the best times of her life there, and some of the worst. The next few days would bring the happiest moments of all.

Angel wondered if she should ask Jack to circle around a little, allowing her to see more of the planet. She had never really taken the time to see Eriadne from the air. When the Vorlon had abducted Angel and her sister, they had been unconscious on arrival, and Angel had been in no better condition when Lucas Buck had first taken her away from her home. Her brief return when Lucas tried to abduct her sister had given Angel no chance to see the planet below, as she had both descended and escaped in darkness.

When she had come back to Eriadne in '76, she had had an opportunity to view the world from above, as she had descended in the shuttle piloted by Matthew Gideon. At the time though, she had been tired and depressed, and she had barely glanced outside the window. On her return to the planet in '79, when she had thought--wrongly--that she may be able to find peace there after the loss of her child, Angel had been far too distracted by her exhaustion and misery to consider taking in the view.

Now a different Captain Gideon piloted the ship, and although Angel frequently felt a little tired--too much bed and not enough sleep--she was never miserable. Glancing across at Jack, she couldn't help but smile, as a bubble of joy welled up inside her. His hair had grown too long again, and it flopped over his eyes as he leaned forward to examine the instruments in front of him. Angel's finger twitched with her desire to reach out and brush the soft locks back from the face of the man she adored, touching him, caressing his face, then... Angel clasped her hands firmly in front of her. Soon enough there would be time for touching. Lots and lots of touching.

Angel shifted her eyes to Jack's hands, and she watched closely as he made careful adjustments to their course. Her husband-to-be had been teaching her how to pilot their ship in recent weeks, but she wasn't yet confident enough to manage their descent herself, particularly when she was bubbling over with excitement. Angel worried that she might lose control of her telekinetic power and jostle the ship in some way. It seemed that her powers had gotten stronger with every year that passed and she was now always careful to keep them under control.

The raven-haired witch smiled to herself as she thought that if she went on like this, she'd become as carefully controlled as her older sister. [Yeah, like *that's* ever going to happen!] Angel's inner voice snorted with derision and laughter at the very idea of her becoming as uptight as Demon. The two sisters may have grown more alike over the years, with Angel restraining herself more, while Demon relaxed some of her rigid control, but Angel knew that she would always be the wayward younger sister. Nothing would ever change that.

Thinking of Demon brought Angel's mind to thoughts of her other sisters. They would soon all be together again for the first time in years. Another little bubble of excitement burst to the surface of Angel's mind and she couldn't help grinning. She only just stopped herself from laughing out loud.

The last time the four sisters had all been together was back in '72, when they had met on Cygnus 36. That reunion had almost ended in disaster, with Lily badly hurt and Ilas nearly losing her son, Vya. Angel and Demon had both been injured in the fight to recover Vya's body from the evil that had taken it, and to banish that evil to the confinement of an Apocalypse Box. Angel shivered at the memories of that time, but shrugged off her fears as she remembered that it had all worked out well in the end, with one exception.

A rift had developed between Matt Gideon and Max Eilerson, whom Matt had blamed for the death of one of his crewmen. That rift had never been healed, and Angel could only hope that the two men would at least remain polite in the days ahead. She didn't want bickering and snide remarks between Max and Matt to ruin her wedding and the days they planned to spend together as a family afterwards. Angel decided that if the two of them didn't behave, she'd knock their heads together and deal with Demon and Ilas getting annoyed with her afterwards.

At the thought of the wedding, Angel couldn't help herself. A little ripple of laughter escaped her, causing Jack to look around at her and smile. He lifted a hand from the controls just long enough to blow her a kiss, winking at her and grinning, then going back to his piloting. Angel didn't need Demon's powers to know how he was feeling. Jack was blissfully happy, as she was, too.

All the plans had been made for the ceremony, which was to take place in the throne room of the castle and to be followed by a grand reception in the main dining hall. Her sisters had already arrived and were waiting for them on the planet below, having gone down from the Excalibur earlier that day. Angel had no doubt that Demon, Lily and Ilas would be rushing around frantically, making sure that everything was being prepared ready for the big day.

As the Angel's Rest had reached orbit above Eriadne, they had been greeted by the sight of the huge ship looming around the edge of the atmosphere. The Excalibur had immediately made contact, and Angel had been delighted to see Commander Christina Jackson, the First Officer, beaming out of the viewscreen at her.

Christina had told them that all of the Excalibur's passengers had gone on ahead, and John, Luke and Lily, Ilas, Max and Dureena, as well as Matt and Demon, with all the children, were waiting for them at the castle. The Excalibur's First Officer had gone on to congratulate the happy couple, expressing her regret that she'd be unable to attend the ceremony.

"Someone has to stay behind and mind the store." She had smiled ruefully, then grinned as she went on, "But I know G'Tan and all his family are looking forward to being there, and Sangeetha has spent the last week deciding what she's going to wear, changing her mind every hour, on the hour."

This comment had provoked an outburst of protesting laughter and denial from the newly promoted Second Officer, Lt. Commander Sangeetha Siddhartha, who had stood beside the Captain's chair, grinning as broadly as Christina.

"That's not true! You know me, Angel. I have absolutely no interest in clothes whatsoever!"

Angel had laughed out loud, remembering fondly the hours she and Sangeetha had spent browsing through catalogues of clothing and shoes, choosing what to order for delivery at the next port of call. Those years spent living on the Excalibur had mostly been happy for Angel, and the friendships she had made then would last forever.

She and Jack had told Christina how much they would miss her being with them at their wedding, invited every other member of the crew of the Excalibur who could be released from duty to attend, then bade the big ship farewell, and began their descent.

Angel brought her attention back to the present and looked out of the viewscreen in front of her again. The clouds had all blown away and they were low enough now to make out individual details of the landscape. They were just flying over the Carillon Gap, and then...

As the castle came into view, Angel's heart did a complete back somersault. This was it. This was where her family was waiting to be with her when she married the man with whom she planned to spend every minute of the rest of her life. This was the place where she would truly experience the happiest day of her life.

"They're here!" Deborah's cry brought Gideon rushing out onto the terrace outside her rooms. He lifted his hand to shade his eyes, as he peered into the distance where she pointed. Sure enough, a black speck was just visible against the bright blue of the cloudless sky, growing steadily larger as it approached the castle. The Angel's Rest had arrived.

Gideon smiled as he remembered the name Jack Gideon had given his ship. A good name, but he suspected that Angel would be getting very little rest in the next few hours. Her sisters would make sure of that.

Deborah was grinning widely, almost bouncing with excitement and happiness as she grabbed Gideon's hand and pulled him across the terrace back into the living room, yelling, "Come on! We have to be down at the landing area when they arrive!"

Gideon smiled as he thought how much he loved seeing his wife so animated. Few were privileged to see her so relaxed, happy and laughing. She only dropped the mask of her control around her family and close friends, and she was only ever completely at ease, showing all her vulnerabilities and weaknesses, when she was alone with her husband.

Seeing Deborah so excited, Gideon laughed as he ran alongside her, then decided he'd better save his breath for running. He wasn't getting any younger, and his wife's long legs set a fast pace down the stairs, out into the courtyard, then through the gate and out across the drawbridge, running into a gentle, warm breeze that barely ruffled the grass beyond the castle walls.

Ahead of them, he could see a swirl of emerald green fabric that showed Lily was running as fast as her little legs could carry her. Ilas ran alongside her tiny sister, keeping pace with her, although Gideon knew Ilas could easily outrun Lily if she chose. The shape-shifter had retained the white skinned, blue-haired exotic appearance she generally favored, when she could easily have shifted to something that could run much faster. Ilas obviously wanted to stay close to Lily, as they had been since they had been reunited on the Excalibur several days before.

As Gideon ran, he frowned, thinking back on the days they had spent on board his old ship. He and his family had been picked up from Minbar as arranged, to find Max, Dureena, Ilas and their children already on board. The reunion between the three sisters had been moving, as had Gideon's own meeting with John, Luke and Dureena. The only fly in the ointment had been



Max Eilerson, who had stood to one side, sneering in his usual aloof, superior fashion, at the happiness around him.

Gideon had bitten his lip, and for once in his life kept his mouth shut. It had been difficult, but he didn't want to start fighting with Max before Angel's wedding. Anyway, if he had, Deborah would have gotten mad with him, and Gideon would have ended up trying to sleep on the couch that hadn't got any

bigger in the years since they had left the Excalibur.

So for once, he had exercised some discretion, enjoyed his wife's body next to his in their old bed, and avoided Max as much as possible. Gideon had soon realized that the xeno-archeologist was also avoiding him, and he suspected that Ilas and Dureena had given Max strict instructions to behave. It would be interesting to see how long the truce would last.

Gideon and Deborah arrived at the landing area seconds after Lily and Ilas, and Gideon became aware of the sound of running feet. He turned around and grinned as he saw John, Luke and Dureena following close behind them. At first he thought Max was nowhere in sight, but then, looking back up at the castle, Gideon realized that the older man was standing on the battlements, accompanied by all the children, watching the scene below.

Deborah squeezed Gideon's hand hard, letting loose a little ripple of excitement, as the ship hovered above them, then slowly lowered itself onto its landing gear, settling a little into the hard ground. While the Angel's Rest was a small ship by comparison with the Excalibur--well, *all* ships were small compared to his old command--Gideon could see that she was easily ten times the size of the shuttle along side which she settled. Jack and Angel would be able to carry some weighty cargo in her. As the ship's engines whined down into silence, Gideon pulled his wife closer to his side, kissed her gently on the cheek and whispered, "Go. Be with your sisters."

The look Deborah gave him was full of passion, gratitude and happiness, and she sent a wave of love that washed over him, as she let go of his hand. Then she moved forward to join Lily and Ilas as they waited impatiently for the ramp to descend. Gideon stepped back and stood next to John, with Luke and Dureena, watching the sisters closely.

John murmured softly, "This will be interesting. They haven't all been together since the Vorlon inside Demon went into hibernation. Do you think they'll still be able to merge when they touch?"

Gideon shook his head. "Don't know." He refused to speculate further.

Memories of the astonishing things the sisters had achieved when merged raced through his mind. Even without their youngest sister, Deborah, Lily and Angel had been able to carry out the most incredible feats, saving the Excalibur more than once when she'd been under attack from overwhelming forces. But that had been before the Vorlon inside Deborah had gone to sleep, and before Galen's attack had diminished her powers. Not wanting to think about those difficult times, Gideon concentrated on watching as the Angel's Rest lowered her ramp, and two figures emerged.

He smiled as the first figure, dressed in skin-tight red leather, almost tumbled down the ramp in her haste to join her sisters. Angel hadn't changed much physically in the months since Gideon had last seen her. She was as beautiful as ever, her long, raven hair streaming behind her as she ran, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement that was visible even at a distance. The main difference between now and when Gideon had last seen Angel was the aura of joy that surrounded her and the expression of sheer happiness on her face.

Gideon couldn't take his eyes off her. Her body was as stunning as always, her long, slim legs encased in soft leather, her tiny waist nipped in by her short jacket, her generous breasts pressing out against the supple fabric, displaying her amazing cleavage where the jacket was buttoned low. Gideon knew that when Angel turned, he would see her incredible butt, which the tight red leather of her pants would display to perfection.

Angel was as sexy as ever, and Jack Gideon was a lucky man.

Gideon swallowed a wave of jealousy and focused his attention on his own wife. Deborah was just as beautiful as her sister, and as sexy, and he knew he should never take that for granted. Her long, blonde hair, which she now kept straight most of the time, was tied back with a black scarf, and her black jeans displayed a butt that was just as sexy as her younger sister's. Deborah's shirt may not have been as tightly fitted as Angel's jacket, but it was also buttoned low, and the swelling of the breasts Gideon adored was visible in the cleavage.

Jack wasn't the only Gideon here who was lucky, Matt reminded himself. Matt Gideon had been lucky enough to be married to this beautiful and passionate woman for over ten years. That was more luck than any man deserved.

A massive shockwave sent Gideon staggering, and startled him out of his introspection.

"What the fuck was that? An earthquake?" Gideon swore as he reached out and steadied Luke, who stood next to him, staring at the sisters open-mouthed and pointing.

The four of them had come together at the bottom of the ramp, and held each other tightly. Four heads, one blonde, one black, one red and one blue, touched as their arms encircled each other. Gideon remembered a time when they had come together like that before, and a bright light had emerged from them, swirling around them, the visible symbol of their combined powers.

This time there was no light, and Gideon was convinced that the previous light must have been created by the Vorlon, which now slept inside his wife's head, never to be woken during her lifetime. Now that the Vorlon was dormant, instead of light there was darkness.

Gideon watched with some apprehension as a shadow seemed to form around the sisters, a darkness that surrounded them, oozing and flowing almost like liquid, expanding into a fog of gloom, until it almost obscured the women from view. He had seen this before, although then the cloud had not been so dense. When the Excalibur had come under attack from a ship full of rogue telepaths, Deborah, Angel and Lily had joined together to block the attack. A darkness had surrounded them then, but it had been nothing like so intense as it was now.

A voice spoke from his side, asking, "Is that normal?"

Gideon turned abruptly to see Jack Gideon standing beside him. He hadn't noticed his doppelganger joining them, and it felt somehow uncomfortable hearing his own voice speak, and seeing his own face on another man.

The retired Captain shook his head. "I've only seen them do that once before, and it was nothing like as dark as this." He looked around at John and raised his eyebrow in inquiry.

John looked worried, but shook his head. "I can't sense a thing. As usual when they come together, Lily has her full telepathic block up and running. But that doesn't look right. Where the hell is it coming from?"

Gideon was startled. John must be *really* worried to curse like that. John *never* swore. Luke and Dureena had joined them, raising their own questions and concerns, everyone talking at once, until another shock rocked the ground.

This time Gideon saw the ripple that seemed to flow through the earth, and realized it had emanated from the sisters. He'd suspected as much when he'd felt the first shock, but now his fears were confirmed. This part of Eriadne was tectonically stable. That was probably part of the reason why the Vorlon had chosen to build here. Any earthquake in this region was no natural phenomenon, and what the sisters were up to looked damned unnatural to Gideon.

The cloud of darkness now surrounded them completely, and Gideon could barely make out their forms through the obscuring gloom. Whatever they were doing, he wanted it to stop. As he took a step forward, he realized that John, Luke, Dureena and Jack were right alongside him. They had all fallen silent at the second ground-shock and obviously didn't like the look of this any more than he did.

"Deborah!" He called but got no answer, and when his friends tried to call out to their partners they had no more success. The sisters seemed to be oblivious to what was going on around them. The black cloud surrounding them continued to swirl and thicken.

Gideon stopped a pace away from the darkness and reached out tentatively with his hand. He pulled his fingers back quickly and put them in his mouth, sucking them to try and warm them.

"Cold." He mumbled around his fingers and his fears grew. The cloud of darkness was bitterly cold, and he worried about what might be happening to the sisters, who they could no longer see through the shadows. Deep inside him, Gideon's fears began to rise.

What had gone wrong? What was happening to his wife and her sisters? This was supposed to be a happy time, and nothing like this had ever happened before when they had come together. What was different now? There was only one factor he could think of that was different, one person who had never been with all four sisters together before.

Gideon turned to look accusingly at Jack Gideon when the sound of running feet behind him made him pause, and he moved to stop his son from rushing into the cloud of darkness surrounding the sisters. "Marcus, no! It's cold. You could be hurt!"

Marcus struggled for a moment, then looked up at his father, fear filling his large hazel eyes. "I can't feel her, Dad. When I send to Mum, she's not there. What happened?"

Gideon hugged his son tightly, wondering how to answer the boy. If Marcus couldn't link to his mother through the mental bond they shared, then something was seriously wrong. The retired Captain could feel his fear like a lump stuck in his throat, and desperately tried to control it before his empathic son detected it. Was this his punishment for loving and lusting after Deborah's sister? Was he about to lose them both to something he didn't understand and couldn't control?

Before Gideon could answer his son's question, John's son, who had followed his best friend at a slightly less reckless pace, spoke breathlessly. "Ma is blocking us. But the way we send to her is different to a normal telepathic contact. It's like..." Dasha hesitated, then went on when his father smiled down at him encouragingly, "It's like being on a different wavelength. Maybe if we all try at once we can get through."

By this time Vya, Faylinn and Naima had joined the two boys, and the five children looked anxiously at the cloud that hid their mothers, all gazing at their other parents, asking for

answers they didn't have. Dureena put her arm around Vya's waist, while Luke held Faylinn and Naima by the hand.

"Are you going to let *children* deal with this?" The voice that sounded so like his own was muffled. Gideon looked around to see Jack sucking his fingers, having tried to touch the cloud, exactly as Gideon had.

"Try that again and you could lose fingers to frostbite. The children have a special bond to their mothers. They may be able to get through where we can't." Luke Raven's tone was acerbic as he moved to examine Jack's hand.

Gideon looked down at Marcus, and asked, "Can you do it?" He hated being helpless, hated having to rely on his son's special link to his mother.

A part of him wondered whether they really needed to do anything. The sisters had never been in danger when they linked before. Maybe this was just a variant on their powers, a quirk that arose because they had been apart for so long, or maybe because a man from another universe was now present. But only a part of him thought that. The rest of him was sure something was very wrong, and he was sure it was all somehow his fault. Or perhaps it was Jack Gideon who was responsible. One way or another, he was convinced that a Gideon was to blame. So what else was new?

Marcus looked up and gave his father a reassuring, if tentative smile. "We can try."

The young boy turned to the other children and held out his hands. The five of them formed a circle a few meters away from their mothers and closed their eyes, while the others looked on in worried silence.

The pause that followed gave Gideon a chance to observe yet again how much older than his cousins Vya looked. Although still less than eleven years old, Vya looked like a full grown man. He matched his mother's blue-haired pallor in his current appearance, which he had maintained all the time the families had been together, the only difference being the bright blue of the eyes he had inherited from his father, which contrasted with the violet of his mother's eyes. Gideon knew that Vya was now much more adult both physically and mentally than his cousins, taking after his mother's species in how quickly he had matured.

While Vya stood head and shoulders above his cousins, the three boys and two girls all closed their eyes and their facial expressions became equally passive as they tried to contact their mothers. Gideon looked anxiously at the others, seeing that John, Luke and Dureena looked equally concerned, while Jack Gideon had a face like thunder and just looked seriously pissed off. For a moment, Gideon wondered if his own face held a similar expression. Was that how all Gideons hid their fears? With anger?

Gideon's anxiety grew with every second that passed, then he suddenly wondered where Mattie was. Why had she not joined her family? A quick glance up at the castle showed that Gideon's daughter had stayed on the battlements, standing next to Max Eilerson, who hadn't shifted from his spot, although he now knelt, holding his daughter, Ilori, in his arms.

Gideon realized that Mattie and Ilori were the only children who didn't have mental links to their mothers. That must be why the two girls had stayed away. The little group on the battlements watched the scene unfolding below them without moving. Gideon wondered how

Max could bear to watch from a distance, doing nothing, then realized that he was equally helpless to reach his wife, and distance made no difference.

A third shockwave rocked the ground, and Gideon span around to see what was happening. His own yell of joy was matched by shouts of delight from his friends and family as they saw the cloud of darkness surrounding the sisters silently implode. It almost seemed as if it were sucked back inside them.

The four heads lifted, and Gideon rushed forward to take Deborah in his arms, hardly aware that the other sisters' partners had followed a nanosecond behind him, while Jack Gideon matched him stride for stride.

Demon rested her head on her husband's shoulder for a moment, one arm around her son, who stood next to them, hugging his parents tightly. Then she lifted her head and smiled in puzzlement at the expression of alarm and anger on Matthew's face.

"What's wrong? You feel worried." She couldn't understand the waves of fear that were sweeping through Matthew and Marcus, slowly subsiding as they took comfort from her embrace.

Marcus' voice sounded in Demon's head as he sent, [[You went away, Mum. When you joined with Auntie Angel, Auntie Lily and Ilas, you went away. We had to try really hard to reach you.]]

At the same time, Demon heard her husband say, "Something happened when you merged with your sisters. This... darkness surrounded you, a bitterly cold, black cloud, and we were worried about you."

Demon looked up into Matthew's worried golden eyes, and she felt his fear again. She didn't understand what he and her son were saying to her, but she sent a wave of reassurance, as she realized that the others present were equally anxious. John and Luke were holding Lily tightly, with their children surrounding them, while Dureena and Vya hugged Ilas, and Jack looked as if he might crush Angel in his arms, he was holding her so tightly.



[What on earth is going on here?] The tall blonde tried to think back to the moment when she had joined with her sisters. It was a blank. She had no memory of the time they had spent merged together. That in itself was odd. In the past, Demon had always been the one to retain the memories of their actions when joined. Why had it been different this time? Why didn't she remember?

"How long did we stay merged?" To Demon, the time had passed in an instant, but she could sense from the anxiety she felt in her husband and son that a greater period of time had elapsed.

"About ten minutes."

Demon was appalled at Matthew's reply. How could she have lost so much time? Why couldn't she remember? All she could recall was the moment when the sisters touched again for the first time in years. The mental bond had given one brief moment of complete joy, then nothing more until she heard her son's voice in her head, calling to her anxiously. It was the fear that pervaded her son's presence in her mind that had forced Demon out of the merge with her sisters.

She looked down at Marcus and stooped to kiss the top of his head. Sending the strongest wave of comfort she could, Demon swallowed her own concerns and smiled at her husband and son. "I'm not quite sure what happened, but we're fine, honestly."

Unable to link with her sisters except when they touched, Demon looked around again, and saw that everyone was calming under the influence of her sendings, and no one seemed to have been hurt. Whatever had happened when they'd merged was over, with no harm done.

Deciding that she would definitely discuss the matter in private with her sisters later, Demon smiled again and kissed Matthew's cheek, then reached out to ruffle Marcus' golden curls. "Thank you for worrying about me, but I'm OK. Now, it's time to show Angel her surprise, so let's go back up to the castle, shall we?"

Matthew smiled back, but Demon could sense that he was still feeling worried and a little frightened by whatever had happened to the sisters. Then he pushed aside all his concerns and kissed her passionately. The touch of his lips, the taste of him, the feeling of his tongue playing with hers sent waves of pleasure and happiness through Demon and she hurriedly suppressed the wave of arousal that rose inside her, threatening to escape her control. She wondered if there would ever be a time when Matthew's kiss didn't ignite her passions, then brought herself back under control as he turned to call out to the others.

"OK, whatever happened, it's over, so let's get back up to the castle." Matthew looked across at Angel and Jack, grinning as he went on, "We have a little surprise for you."

The alarm in Alwyn's ship sounded simultaneously with the surge of pain that raced through the Technomage's brain. He felt as if a band of darkness had clamped itself around his head like a vice, squeezing tighter and tighter, blurring his vision and dulling his mind. He was barely aware of Ishtar's screech of distress as he buried his head in his hands and moaned quietly.

The sound of Sarah's anxious voice pulled Alwyn out of the darkness that seemed to envelop him. She sounded worried and frightened and that wouldn't do at all. Sarah was supposed to be happy. That was Alwyn's main goal in life: to give Sarah the happiness and love she had denied herself for so many years. Anything that made Sarah unhappy must be stopped immediately.

Lifting his head from his hands, Alwyn tried to smile up into his partner's anxious eyes. "It's all right, my dear. It's just a migraine. It will soon go away."

Sarah's beautiful face frowned down at him, her dark eyes full of worry and suspicion. "Since

when have you suffered from migraine? And why would that start the ship's alarm?"

Alwyn forced himself more upright in his armchair in the control room, making himself smile as he drew on the power of his implants to send a flood of endorphins into his brain, soothing the pain. "Just because we've lived together for ten years doesn't mean you know everything about me."

Ishtar's chirp of disbelief drew Alwyn's eyes up to the top of the bookcase on which the small golden dragon was perched. He sent her a swift thought, [[Don't you start! Calm down. I'm fine now and Sarah mustn't worry.]]

The dragon gave another snort, then turned her head away to nudge gently at her baby, who sat beside her on the bookcase, gazing down at the scene below in puzzlement. The baby dragon wasn't yet old enough to catch or send thoughts, and obviously hadn't a clue what was going on, unlike its mother, whose eyes were still whirling with the magenta of her anxiety as she turned her head away.

Alwyn turned his attention back to his partner, who was now standing with her arms crossed, gazing down at him with her eyes narrowed. The Technomage sighed to himself, while almost subconsciously noticing how beautiful Sarah looked. Why did the women in his life never believe him when he lied to them? Other people did. For years he'd managed to fool the entire universe into believing that he was a doddering old man. Now he couldn't even convince his wife and his dragon that he didn't have a headache.

Alwyn's nine year old son's entrance into the control room distracted Sarah and gave Alwyn the chance to call out to his ship to stop sounding the alarm. It had kept beeping in the background, making it harder for the Mage to banish his headache. Blessed silence fell, as Jaysen made his way across the control room that looked like a library, to join his parents.

"What's up, Dad? Why did the ship lurch, and why are you white as a sheet?" Jaysen always did get straight to the point, having inherited his mother's directness.

Alwyn sighed and explained, "I had a sudden migraine. The ship picked up the change in my brain patterns and panicked. So did Ishtar, and that alerted your mother. I'm surrounded by women who coddle me and try to wrap me in cotton wool. I'd appreciate having a son who didn't try to do the same thing."

The Mage's tone was dry, and was rewarded by a grin from his son, who said, "Don't worry, Dad, I ain't got no plans to wrap you up in anything at all."

Sarah sighed and muttered, "You don't have *any* plans, not you ain't got *no* plans. Honestly, Jaysen, I have no idea where you get these expressions. Certainly not from me or your father."

Jaysen protested, and Alwyn leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes as he relaxed, listening to their banter. The distraction of his wife and son's attention was welcome. It gave the Mage a moment in which to focus his energies and identify the source of his pain. It had come from a surge of dark energy, the like of which Alwyn hadn't felt since the last Shadow war.

In many ways it had resembled the mental shaft the Shadows had used to send into the minds of their servants when they required their attention. No Technomage had felt that piercing shaft of mixed alert and pain since the Shadows had traveled beyond the Rim.

While Sarah and Jaysen squabbled over the boy's use of English, and Ishtar sheltered her baby protectively under her wing, Alwyn felt the pathways of the universe with his mind, trying to locate the origin of his discomfort. It didn't take him long, as he'd already suspected he'd recognized part of the mental signature, and he was dismayed to discover he'd been correct.

The source of his pain, and the source of the dark power that had created it, was something he knew all too well. The power came from the merging of the Witches of Eriadne, and in particular from one of those witches. The source of his distress was Angel, whose powers had now grown to dangerous and destructive levels.

Alwyn sighed to himself. This was supposed to have been a nice quiet little vacation to attend the wedding of a friend. He should have known better. Any trip where the witches and Matt Gideon were involved was never simple. And now there were two versions of Matt around, it could only mean double trouble.

The Mage decided that the new Matt--they could call him Jack if they liked, but Alwyn knew who he *really* was--probably needed his ears toasted just as much as the old one had. Thinking those thoughts distracted him from the worries that circled deeper in his mind. How was he going to help Angel control her powers?

Angel clung tightly to Jack's hand as they made their way back up the hill to the castle. Part of her mind was focused on Lily's chatter, as the tiny witch trotted along next to Angel, bringing her up to date on all the latest goings on in their family. Fortunately, once Lily started to talk about her family, she didn't need much participation from her audience, which left the rest of Angel's mind free to think.

What had just happened? The merge with her sisters had started in the same way as it always had before, in a single moment of pure pleasure and happiness, with a sense of belonging and well-being like no other. But then everything had changed. When the sisters had merged in the past, Angel had never retained any memory of what happened after their joining. All that had remained when they resumed their individual personas was a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. Only Demon had remembered what they had done in the merge, and Angel knew that those memories had often troubled her sister. She had always been grateful that she'd never had to carry that burden.

But today had been different.

Today, Angel remembered everything. After the merge she had felt full of life and power. Her mind had stretched out into the universe, and she had felt as if she could touch every star in the heavens, reach into the farthest corners of the galaxy, move planets with a flick of her fingers and darken suns with a blink of her eyes. The power had been followed by anger, which had welled up inside her, threatening to overwhelm her. Why had this power not been available to her when she needed it? Why had she not been able to use this force to save her son?

Angel had felt a darkness fall over her. The stars that a moment before had glittered so brightly in her mind dulled and died as the shadow descended. Her anger blinded and deafened her, and the world had turned bitingly cold. Waves of bitter hatred had started to build within her, and she had fought to control them, needing to direct them, wanting to use the power to seek out Lucas wherever he was hiding, to destroy him and to take her son back from him.

As the dark energies built inside Angel, she had been distracted before she could launch her attack. Voices had penetrated the darkness. Children's voices, filled with love and concern. The voices had touched the hearts of the mothers in the merge, Angel included.

For a moment, she had felt as if Gabriel was crying out to her, calling to her, begging her to come back to him. Then she knew that it was not her child who called. It was her sisters' children and they needed their mothers. Angel had released her hold on the merge. She had let the power drain out of her, let the anger go, and allowed her sisters to rejoin their children.

Remembering all this sent a shudder of fear through Angel. Jack must have felt it, as he turned to her with a look of love and concern that warmed Angel's heart, bringing her back from the darkness that had threatened to draw her down into its heart yet again. The blackness was always so near, but Jack was the light that fought back the shadows. Jack lit her path out of the dark, and she loved him all the more for saving her from that fate.

Angel smiled at her lover, wishing she had Demon's powers so she could let Jack feel how much she loved him. But Jack's smile showed her she didn't need those powers. Jack knew. He didn't need to be told, and he didn't need Angel to project her love. He could feel it from her hand in his; he could see it in her eyes. Angel didn't need to be an empath for him to know how much she loved him.

Thinking of her older sister made Angel look around. Demon and Matt walked hand in hand next to them, with Marcus holding his mother's other hand. Demon's face was a mask, from which Angel knew her older sister was troubled. Shifting her gaze, Angel found that Matt was looking at her, smiling fondly.

She smiled back, and pushing her fears and memories aside, she called out, "So what's this surprise, Matt? What have you been up to?"

Matt shook his head. "Not me. I knew nothing about all this until we got here this morning. None of us did. And you'll find out soon enough, so be patient for once."

Jack snorted with laughter. "Patient? Angelique? I thought you knew her well, Matt. This lady doesn't know the meaning of the word." He lifted Angel's hand and kissed her fingers with his smiling lips, sending a thrill of joy and passion racing through Angel's body.

Laughing aloud, just for the pleasure of feeling so good, Angel said, "Well whatever it is, nothing could make this trip any better than it already is. I have all the people I love around me, and I'll be marrying the man I adore. What more could a girl ask for?"

Jack held Angelique's hand tightly as they crossed the drawbridge into the castle, taking in everything around him. On his previous visit to this planet he had been somewhat distracted by his reunion with Angelique, and he had taken very little notice of the environment. This time he had more leisure to look around and take note.

Emerging from the archway over the drawbridge, they entered a wide open courtyard, with a large lawn in the center, surrounded by high walls and battlements. The grass was smooth as a pool table, and the graveled paths around the edge of the courtyard were immaculate and entirely free of weeds. Someone took a lot of trouble keeping this place in perfect condition.

As he looked around, Jack's mind was busy. He was still troubled by what had happened between the sisters earlier, but had decided to tackle the issue later, when he and Angelique got chance to be alone. For the moment, he concentrated on trying not to feel overwhelmed by all the people around him.

In the previous few years he'd led a solitary life, and he was no longer accustomed to the presence of large numbers of people. The sense of being surrounded almost made him feel trapped and hemmed in, which he knew was ridiculous. How could he spend his life happily confined inside a small ship, but feel claustrophobic when he was in such a wide open space?

Yet somehow he did. There were too many people, too many voices, and it made him uncomfortable.



Gritting his teeth, Jack told himself he'd just have to endure it for a few days, and that it would give him time to catch up with some of his old crewmates. While he knew that the John Matheson who walked a few meters away was not really *his* John, he still wanted to spend time with the younger man, finding out whether he was happy as the Captain of the Excalibur, husband and father. Jack smiled sadly to himself, wishing that *his* John had been

able to find such happiness in his life.

He'd also caught Dureena looking sideways at him, and he wanted to talk to her later, too. The little thief had aged a lot in the years that had passed since Jack had last seen her counterpart in his own universe. He shut his mind to those memories and focused on the woman in the present. Streaks of grey ran through the Zanderi's black hair, and fine lines marked her skin. Jack knew that the Zanderi had shorter life-spans than humans, and the evidence of that fact was written in Dureena's face. Even so, her body was as lithe as ever, still encased in skin-tight leather, and still looking good.

Jack smiled to himself as he remembered how in his years on the Excalibur he had often masturbated to thoughts of what that body would look like if the leather were peeled away, especially from her breasts. Dureena had not been in his chain of command, so he had allowed himself to have such fantasies.

Those pleasant memories were abruptly derailed as they all emerged into the castle courtyard and Jack saw Max Eilerson approaching him, holding the hand of a young girl. Max would not have been high up on Jack's list of people he wanted to see again.

The girl at Max's side wrenched her hand away from the older man, and she ran toward Dureena, crying out, "Mommy! What happened? Why did Mommy Ilas go all dark?"

Dureena stooped and hugged the little girl up tightly, allowing Jack to see how closely the two females resembled each other. It was hard to guess the little girl's age. Jack had never seen a young Zanderi before, so he had nothing to measure against. The child had her mother's golden cat-like eyes, her thick, dark hair, and her firm chin.

This then must be Ilori, the daughter of Dureena and Ilas, and from what Angelique had told Jack, the child was now just over nine Earth years old. Jack shook his head at the idea of the father of this child being the pale-faced, blue-haired woman who had gone to join Max.

[This family is just too damned complicated,] Jack thought to himself. He knew it would get even more convoluted when Alwyn and Sarah arrived the next day. Much as he was looking forward to seeing Sarah again, the thought of even more people surrounding him almost made Jack shudder. He mentally ran through the members of the family into which he was about to marry.

[Four witches, a star-ship Captain and his Chief Medical Officer, a xeno-archeologist and a Zanderi thief, a doctor, a Technomage and another version of me. Oh and let's not forget eight children, one of them also Zanderi, one a shape-shifter, one a telepath and one an empath.]

Looking across the courtyard Jack saw that Faylinn, Naima and Mattie had come together, and were all watching proceedings with eager anticipation. [And three unholy terrors who will undoubtedly grow up to plague some unsuspecting men's lives.]

He decided he was looking forward to meeting Jaysen. Maybe the kid would be more normal than the rest. [Fat chance of that. His father's a Technomage!] Thinking of Alwyn reminded Jack of the other old friend of his who was alive in this universe, but absent from the feast.

Galen. The Mage who had saved Jack's life on more than one occasion, and who may have been responsible for the destruction of everything Jack had loved in his own universe. The man who in this universe had attacked Demon, nearly killing her and her unborn child. The man who most members of this family had sworn to kill if they ever saw him again.

Jack's mind was full of conflict when he thought about his old friend. Had his Galen really destroyed the witches in Jack's universe, and by doing so, removed any chance of Jack finding the cure to the Drakh plague there? Jack didn't want to think about that. He pushed his thoughts toward this universe's Galen's crime.

How could the Technomage have tried to kill Demon? She had never done him any harm. She had been kind and generous to Jack, giving him hope for the future when all he'd had left was despair. She had guided him back to Angelique, and given him a second chance at love. The tall blonde certainly didn't deserve the pain and trouble Galen had caused her.

A squeal of delight from Angelique distracted Jack from his thoughts, and he turned to see her beautiful face light up with happiness as she screamed, "Harry! What are you doing here?"

Jack turned to look at the man who had just emerged from a building into the courtyard. He was great hulk of a man, with an ugly, yet somehow kindly face, and he carried a small dog, which he stooped and placed on the ground. The dog started to bark excitedly, and raced across the open area, launching itself into the air and into Angelique's arms, which had been held out ready to receive the canine missile.

Angelique was laughing and crying at the same time as she held the dog in her arms, saying over and over, "Oh Baby! You've come back to me! Oh Baby, I've missed you so much!"

The feeling was obviously mutual, as the dog licked Angelique's face vigorously between barks, wiping away her tears of joy.

Demon watched the joyous reunion with a sad smile on her face. Since they had found Harry and Baby waiting for them on their arrival that morning, the tall blonde had been trying to figure out what they should do with the man and dog.

Matthew and John hadn't allowed any of their families to descend to the planet until G'Tan and his marines had gone through the castle and village, checking to ensure that this time no nasty surprises awaited them. Well, Harry and Baby hadn't been a nasty surprise, but they had definitely been a bit of a shock and they certainly presented a problem.

Demon and her family had emerged from the Excalibur's shuttle to see the big man holding the small dog in his arms. What had followed had almost been a tragedy. Harry had taken one look at Matthew and his eyes had widened in fear. He had hugged Baby to his chest protectively, whimpering, "Don't hurt him, Boss! It's not his fault, and I promised Miss Angel I'd take care of him. Kill me if you want, but don't hurt Baby!"

Demon and Lily had rushed down the ramp to reassure the big man, while Matthew tried to calm him down, explaining through gritted teeth that he wasn't Lucas Buck. It hadn't been the most auspicious start to the vacation. When Harry realized who he was dealing with, he looked almost as scared as he had on first seeing Matthew.

"You're the man Bubba shot. I'm sorry, he didn't mean to. Bubba wasn't very bright, and he got confused. It wasn't his fault." That phrase seemed to be one of Harry's favorites.

The big man calmed as he recognized the 'pretty ladies', although he hadn't remembered their names. "You're Miss Angel's sisters, ain't you? She talked about you a lot, but I forgot your names. I ain't good at remembering things."

All the time he spoke, Harry had cradled Baby protectively. Demon and Lily had introduced all the other members of their families, reassuring the big man that it didn't matter if he forgot their names again, as they could easily remind him. They were rewarded with a wide, childlike grin of gratitude, and Harry soon calmed, and eventually put Baby down and let him play with the children.

Now Harry stood watching Baby and Angel, with tears streaming down his homely face. Demon moved to his side and patted the big man's arm reassuringly, then turned to the group standing in the courtyard and said, "Why don't we go inside? I'll organize some tea in the drawing room, and we can all catch up with each other's news."

Demon was concerned about how Angel would react when she heard why Harry had fled to Eriadne, and she wanted everyone seated and calm when it happened. As the tall blonde started to usher her friends and family into the castle, Max and Dureena stepped aside.

Max said, "Tea isn't exactly my favorite drink, so why don't Dureena and I take the kids off exploring?" It would have been better if his tone of voice hadn't been quite so irritatingly condescending, but the gesture was appreciated. The children started jumping up and down with excitement, filling the courtyard with the echoes of their squealing and yelling. A wonderful sense of peace and quiet descended as they quickly followed the archeologist and the thief through the castle gateway, crossing the drawbridge out into the fields beyond.

Demon looked up and smiled as she felt Matthew's arm snake around her waist, pulling her to his side.

His eyes were twinkling with laughter as he said, "Tea? *Tea*? Could you get any more English?"

Demon grinned and kissed his cheek gently, laughing softly as she said, "Of course I can! Along with the tea we'll have scones and jam and clotted cream. And maybe a few little cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Then I'll go see if the lawn is still marked out for croquet."

Matthew snorted a laugh and gently steered her toward the main entrance to the castle, following the others inside. As they walked, Demon sighed, realizing that she was no nearer finding a solution to the problem of Harry and Baby than when they had first arrived.

Settling herself on a deep, comfortable sofa, Angel gathered Baby onto her knee, leaning her head against Jack's shoulder as he sat at her side with his arm around her. Having her puppy back again made the joy of this time complete. She had missed the little dog, missed his devotion and his playfulness, missed the softness of his brown and white coat, which she now stroked fondly, missed the warmth of his big brown eyes that now gazed up at her adoringly.

Angel allowed herself to wallow in happiness for a few minutes, then straightened and smiled across at the chair where Harry sat, holding a tea cup and saucer, looking as if he were terrified he might accidentally crush the delicate china and disgrace himself.

The big man started when Angel called his name softly, and the cup rattled dangerously in the saucer. Demon rose from the sofa where she'd sat curled up next to Matthew, and gently took the china from Harry's hand, saying softly, "Here, let me get rid of those things for you."

Harry gave the tall blonde a grateful smile, then looked across anxiously at Angel and said, "I'm sorry, Miss Angel. I promised you I'd stay with the Boss and look out for your baby, but I couldn't stay any longer. I know I broke my promise, but I had to leave. It wasn't my fault, honest."

Angel smiled reassuringly at Harry, and she said softly, "It's OK, Harry. I know you wouldn't have left unless you had to. What happened?"

The raven haired witch braced herself, knowing she was going to hear Harry talk about Lucas and Gabriel. A part of her longed to hear about her son, but not with all the others around. And especially not with Jack and Matthew listening to every word. They'd only get mad and start yelling about what they wanted to do to Lucas, and Angel felt she couldn't bear that. She told herself sternly that that part of her life was over. She had been a different person then. Maybe if she could bring herself to believe that, it wouldn't hurt so much.

Harry took a deep breath and launched into his story. Glancing at the others, Angel realized that they had heard it all before. This was only news to her and Jack.

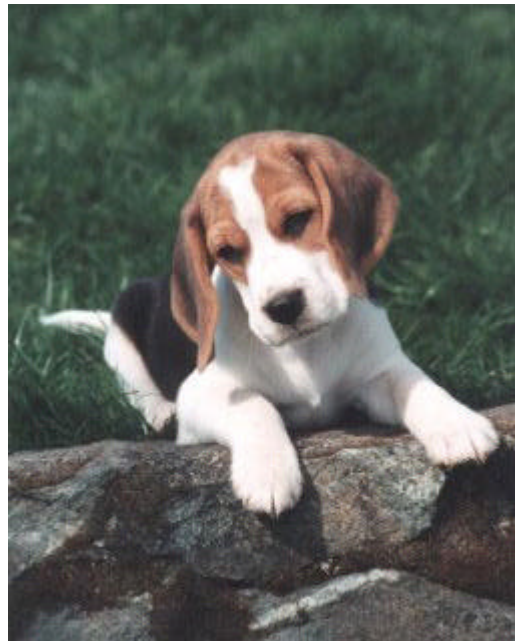
"Miss Angel, the Boss changed after you left. He got harder and nastier. Before then he'd sometimes do kind things, help people when they needed it, even if he always did look for something in return. After you'd gone it was different. He got what he wanted by bullying and hurting people, and he seemed to enjoy it." Harry paused, staring at the floor while searching

for the right words, and when he looked up at Angel again, his eyes were filled with fear and sadness.

"I think something inside him died when you left, Miss, and it was the good part. Any good there was in him went away, and only the bad bits were left behind. He scared me more than he'd ever done, which is a lot, but I wouldn't have let that drive me away. No, Miss, I made you a promise, and I'd have kept it, but he started to turn his eye toward Baby."

Harry licked his dry lips, darting nervous glances around the room at his audience. Angel leaned forward to touch his arm encouragingly, knowing that having so many people listening to him so attentively would be a novel and alarming experience for Harry. John, Lily and Luke sat together on one sofa, while Ilas sat next to Matthew and Demon on another. All of them remained silent as Harry gulped and went on with his story.

"I think Baby reminded the Boss of you, Miss Angel, and he didn't like that. I did my best to keep Baby out of his way, but sometimes Baby would get away from me, and get back into the house. Then the Boss would throw things at him and threaten to skin him alive if he caught Baby indoors again. I made Baby a nice bed in the barn, but Baby wasn't used to living outside, so he used to try and creep back into the house again. One day the Boss found Baby in the kitchen and he threw a knife at him. Baby ran away, but the knife nicked his ear. See?"



Harry pointed and Angel looked down at the little dog in her lap. Running her fingers over his right ear, she could feel the place where the flesh was split. The scar ran about a centimeter into the ear. Baby looked up at her with his big brown eyes, completely trusting as Angel fingered the healed wound. She swallowed a wave of anger, and said quietly, "Go on. What happened next?"

Harry looked at her unhappily, then at the others sitting listening. He swallowed hard and almost whispered, "He told me to kill Baby and bury him in the woods. Then he laughed and said if I couldn't bring myself to kill Baby, I should just bury him alive. He got this really scary look in his eyes when he said, *'I know how it feels to be buried alive, Harry. There's nothing worse. Just bury him alive, and make sure I never see him again.'* Honest, Miss, he scared me more that day than he'd ever scared me before. I knew I couldn't stay any more. I knew that if I didn't get Baby away from there, the Boss would kill him, and then he'd kill me, except maybe he wouldn't, maybe he'd just bury *me* alive."

The big man shuddered visibly, and Angel again suppressed her fury at Lucas' cruelty, murmuring reassurances. Harry went on, with a proud smile, "I remembered what you'd said, Miss Angel, so I packed Baby's things and came here. I got away before dawn, so the Boss didn't catch us, and I got the next shuttle out of there. I found a job and worked my passage to Brakiri, then got another job on a transport bringing supplies to the colonists here. I got here a few weeks ago, and I was going to send a message to your sister like you told me, but by then I'd forgotten her name." He nodded at Demon and blushed in misery at his inability to

remember such an important detail. Then his craggy features broke into an embarrassed smile as he said, "But the people in the village knew who I was talking about, and they said I didn't need to send a message as you were all coming here soon. So I waited, and here we are."

Harry's smile widened and Angel couldn't help smiling back. Inside, she was seething, her anger with what Lucas had done threatening to break out at any moment. How could he be so cruel? How could he threaten to kill a defenseless creature so horribly? Angel rubbed her fingers over the split in Baby's ear and decided that Lucas was beyond redemption. He was completely evil and there was no hope of him ever changing.

A wave of sadness swept through her, almost overwhelming the anger. Angel remembered how she had once thought she could love Lucas enough to make him the man she longed for him to be. She had thought that by loving him she could change him; could rid him of the Rage that inhabited his soul. She had been wrong, and Harry's story only reinforced the depth of her failure.

By giving the Rage what it had always wanted, an heir, Angel had reinforced its power over Lucas, damning him to a lifetime of cold cruelty, with only the prospect of death at the hand of his own son to look forward to. It was a horrible fate for the man who Angel would never completely stop loving. She didn't know which emotion was stronger, her hatred of the Rage, her anger at Lucas, or her sorrow for his fate. All the feelings mixed together inside her, confusing her.

Jack, seeming to sense her unhappiness, gently squeezed her shoulders. Angel looked up at him and tried to smile, telling herself that none of this mattered any more. She had Jack now, and the part of her life that was Lucas Buck was now over. And at least she had Lucas' promise that he would never come after her or hurt her family. Whatever else Lucas was, he was a man of his word.

Matt broke the silence that had followed Harry's tale, asking, "So where is he, Harry? Where can we find Lucas?"

Angel drew in a ragged breath, watching as Ilas sat up abruptly, leaning forward in her seat, her eyes glittering in anticipation of revenge. The years that had passed since the murder of Dureena's child hadn't dulled the little shape-shifter's thirst for vengeance. Angel shuddered as she thought about what Ilas and Dureena would do to Lucas if they ever caught up with him. They would make him realize that being buried alive wasn't perhaps the worst way to die after all.

The raven haired witch almost sighed with relief as Harry shook his head vigorously, his face a mask of fear.

"No, Sir, I ain't saying. You think you know the Boss but you don't. If you thought he was bad before, he's ten times worse now. He'd kill you all. I don't care how strong you think you are, or how many people you took with you, he'd still kill you. He's a devil in human form. He can do things that ain't natural. When he threw that knife at Baby, he didn't touch it with his hand. He just looked at it, and it flew across the kitchen. I've seen him kill a man just by looking at him. Stopped his heart just with a look, then started it again. He did that over and over, with the man screaming in awful pain every time, until the Boss got bored and let the man die. And that was just someone who was late paying a debt."

The big man shook his head again, refusing to meet Matt's eyes. "You might look like the Boss, but I can tell you ain't like him. And neither is this other guy." Harry gestured at Jack. "Even if both of you went up against the Boss, you'd lose, and Miss Angel would be sad again, and I ain't gonna let that happen."

Tears welled up in Angel's eyes, and she leaned forward again to pat Harry's arm. "It's OK, Harry, you don't have to tell."

Angel glared at Matt as he opened his mouth to speak, then went on, "I'm not sad at all. I'm very happy that you and Baby are here, and that we can all be together again." It was the truth, if not the whole truth. Angel *was* happy. She just chose to speak about that happiness, rather than all the other emotions that washed around inside her, threatening to burst loose. She rushed on, "Jack and I need some help on our ship, don't we Jack?"

Angel looked around at her lover and frowned when she saw his brow crease. She forged on regardless. "You and Baby can come with us when we leave and live on the Angel's Rest with us. That will be OK, won't it, Jack?"

Jack looked at Angel, and chewed the inside of his lip. It was a gesture that sent shudders down Angel's spine, as it was something Lucas had done when he was annoyed. Jack sighed and said quietly, "Harry is welcome to join us. I know he was a good friend to you, and took care of you. I'd be happy to have him on the ship helping us. But Baby..."

Jack paused and reached over to pat the little dog gently on the head. Angel watched as her puppy looked up at Jack with the same adoration he gave her. Baby shuffled half off her knee and onto Jack's, shifting his head to lick at the hand that was patting him.

Jack sighed and went on, "I'm sorry, Angel, but a spaceship is no place for a dog. It wouldn't be fair. It would be better if maybe Matt and Demon took Baby and gave him a home on Earth."

Angel was silent for a moment, then all the pain and anger that had been held inside during the last hour while she had listened to Harry's story welled up inside her and burst forth.

"And I wouldn't marry you, Jack Gideon, if you were the last man alive in the universe!"

The door slammed behind Angel with such force that the tea cups rattled in their saucers, and Demon had to lunge forward to prevent a cake stand from wobbling off the small table on which it rested.

There was a long pause, while everyone looked up at Jack, who stood in the middle of the room, chewing his lip, his head down, glaring at the door hard enough to burn holes in it. The silence was broken by Matt's voice saying quietly, "Well, that could have gone better."

Demon glared at her husband then leaped to her feet to block Jack's path as he strode toward the door of the drawing room. He looked as if he wasn't going to bother pausing to open it, but just planned on charging straight through the solid wood. Demon was quite familiar with that look. It was one she had seen on her husband's face more than once, and just as today, it had most often been Angel who had provoked his fury.

Laying her hand lightly on Jack's arm, Demon started to send out waves of calm and serenity. Her powers may have diminished but she could still project emotion when she was close to her subject. The days when she had been able to control the feelings of forty angry men standing in the courtyard were long gone, but she could still soothe one furious starship captain when she was actually touching him.

As the calmness washed over Jack, Demon spoke softly, watching as his breathing steadied and the fury in his eyes faded. "I don't think you should go after her just yet. You'll only fight again. Leave it for a little while."

For a moment, Jack looked as if he was going to argue, and he glared at her defiantly. Then all the fight seemed to drain out of him, and he looked at Demon with eyes full of fear and despair. She had seen that look before, when Jack had first arrived in her universe, and it almost broke Demon's heart.

She reached out to touch his face gently, and sent another wave of calm, knowing that the physical contact would help her ease Jack's pain. Demon then turned to smile at her audience.

Harry sat with his mouth agape, hugging Baby again, looking frightened. The little dog had tried to follow his mistress, and had nearly gotten caught in the slamming door. Harry had scooped him up, and now sat cradling Baby protectively. Luke and John sat either side of Lily, their faces showing their mixed shock and sadness at the fury that had burst out of Angel. Matthew leaned forward in his seat, shaking his head sadly.

Raising her voice a little, Demon tried to lighten the mood. "I think it's time for the sisters to step in. Let Lily, Ilas and me go after her. I'll tell Angel that she's absolutely right, and I can't understand how she could ever have believed she should marry you. That will automatically make her disagree with me, and we'll soon have her yelling at me rather than you. Of course, that will make me yell back again, so I'll storm out, then Ilas and Lily will calm Angel down again."

Jack took a deep breath and forced a wry smile to his face. "It sounds like this isn't the first time you've handled one of Angelique's temper tantrums."

Demon laughed. "Temper tantrum? Angel? How could you possibly say that? My sister is always cool, calm and collected."

Jack snorted a laugh, then took Demon's hand, lifting it to his lips and kissing it gently. Demon smiled, her eyes sliding sideways to where Matthew still sat on the sofa, watching them with narrowed eyes. The tall blonde decided she'd better move quickly, before someone else threw a temper tantrum.

Matthew surged to his feet and strode to the middle of the room, sliding his arm around his wife's waist possessively. Demon smiled up at him, then tilted her head to kiss his cheek, sending a wave of love to him as she did so. [There, that should put the green monster back in its box for a while,] she thought.

She said to her husband, "While we're with Angel, could you show Jack to the rooms we picked out for him and Angel?" Demon then turned to Harry and smiled reassuringly. "And could you help Jack get the things they need from his ship, Harry?"

Harry nodded vigorously, and finally released his hold on Baby, who immediately jumped off his knee, and trotted over to sit leaning against Jack's leg, gazing upwards adoringly. Jack looked startled for a moment, then leaned down to pat Baby's head again, before turning to Harry and smiling. "Thanks. I could do with the help. If it's worth bothering, that is. If there's not going to be a wedding..." He trailed off and Demon could sense his unhappiness, even though he concealed his emotions behind a poker face.

"Nonsense. Of course there'll be a wedding. Lily, Ila and I will sort that out. Come on girls, our sister has ditched her wings and become a fallen angel, complete with a pitchfork and tail. Let's go get her halo back in place." Demon grinned at Jack, and was rewarded by a soft chuckle from her husband.

Matthew whispered softly in her ear, "I almost feel sorry for Angel with you three ganging up on her. Almost. Go get her, tiger."

Demon kissed him again quickly, then led her sisters from the room.

[Now where would Angel go when she's that pissed off? I think I can guess...]

Jack took another deep breath to calm himself some more, then turned to the other men who had all risen to their feet. He found that John Matheson was smiling at him sadly, while Matt Gideon was still looking suspicious. Jack realized that Matt hadn't appreciated the gesture Jack had made in kissing Demon's hand. [For God's sake, man, wake up and smell the roses! I'm head over heels in love with Angelique, not with your wife!]

Then Jack thought about it, and knew that if he had watched Matt kissing Angelique's hand, he'd have felt exactly the same way. Even seeing the way Matt looked at Angelique sometimes raised Jack's hackles. [I guess that makes us both jealous guys.]

Pushing those thoughts aside, Jack nodded to the other men. "I could use some help getting our things from the ship. We brought supplies for the wedding party, and I have no idea why Angelique needs quite so many clothes when we're only here for a few days, but I think half the hold is filled with the stuff she wants hauled up here."

He quickly suppressed the wave of fear that threatened to overwhelm him. Would Angelique still want all her things? Would Demon, Lily and Ila be able to bring her around? What if they couldn't? What if it was really over between him and Angelique? How could he go back to living life alone? Without Angelique there would be no point to his life and no reason to go on living.

The pain that shot through Jack's chest almost brought him to his knees. [Is that what a breaking heart feels like? I never knew it was such a physical thing.]

It took every bit of strength he had to keep standing. All he really wanted to do was run after Angelique and beg her to forgive him, but he couldn't do that. Not when she was wrong and he was right. Jack looked down at the little dog sitting quietly at his feet. Baby was a cute little thing. He was small for a beagle, and Jack remembered how Angelique had told him that Baby was the runt of the litter. Well, even a runt deserved a better life than being cooped up inside a spaceship for the rest of his life.

As Jack took a step toward the door, Baby stood up and followed at his heel, as if almost welded to his side. The little dog seemed to have decided it had a new master, whether Jack wanted him or not. Jack groaned silently. [Don't do this to me, Baby. Don't make me like having you around. That's not fair.] The little dog ignored the silent plea, gazing up at Jack happily, his mouth open and his tail wagging vigorously.

Jack reached the door and had started to open it, when Luke Raven's voice brought him to a halt.



"Could the rest of you go on ahead and give me a moment with Jack, please?"

Jack turned, frowning. He barely knew Luke, having only been briefly acquainted with his counterpart in Jack's own universe. What did Luke Raven want to say to him that he didn't want the others to hear? Whatever it was, Jack decided that he wanted to hear it. He waved Luke toward one of the chairs, and walked over to sit opposite, as Matt, John and Harry left the room.

Baby followed Jack as if on a leash, and settled happily, laying his head on his new master's feet.

Luke sat nervously, wondering how Jack would react to what Luke had to tell him. The doctor was desperately trying to convince himself that he was right to butt in like this. He knew Angel well enough to be sure that this was information she would never have given to Jack, but it was important that he knew.

Jack was beginning to look impatient at the lengthening silence, so Luke took a deep breath and said hurriedly, "How much has Angel told you about what happened after she had her baby?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing. She just said she had the baby then left him with Lucas Buck. She doesn't talk much about that time of her life. I think it still hurts her too much."

Luke watched Jack's face carefully. He'd spent enough years getting to know Matt Gideon that he could now read Jack Gideon pretty accurately. Jack obviously adored Angel, and even talking about her pain caused him great sadness. Luke mentally crossed his fingers that Angel's sisters could bring her around. It would be a tragedy if these two people didn't get married.

Luke smiled to himself, thinking, [John and I have never been able to resist Lily when she really wants something. I can only hope Angel is as susceptible to our little firecracker's charms.]

Bringing his attention back to the man in front of him, Luke started to explain the damage that had been done to Angel's body by her difficult pregnancy and even more difficult birth. When Angel had returned to Earth after having her baby, Sarah Chambers had looked after her, and had exchanged several calls with Luke, consulting with him on Angel's injuries and illness. The doctor therefore knew exactly how Angel had been affected. He went into some technical detail, knowing that during the time Jack had spent commanding the Excalibur in his

own universe, he would have become much more familiar with medical terminology than most starship captains.

Jack sat listening in silence, leaning forward in his chair, playing with Baby's ears as the little dog sat between his feet. When Luke finally finished his description, Jack looked up and asked quietly, "Why have you told me all this, Doc?"

Luke smiled sadly. "Because Angel won't. And it's something you have to know, because this is why Angel must never have another baby. I'm really sorry, Jack, but having another child would probably kill her."

A long silence followed Luke's blunt words. He watched as Jack looked down at Baby again, and continued to play with the little dog's ears. Eventually, Jack looked up at Raven again and smiled.

"Kids aren't important to me. Having Angelique is enough. Having kids at my age wouldn't have been such a great idea anyway. And if I don't think we should take a dog onto the ship, I certainly don't think it's a suitable place to raise a family. You and John and Matt were lucky. A ship the size of the Excalibur had enough room for your kids to run and play. The Angel's Rest doesn't have that kind of space. It's no place for kids." Jack looked down at Baby and smiled again, "And it's no place for a dog, either, so don't go getting any ideas."

Baby's tail thumped against the ground as he looked up lovingly at the man he had adopted as his new master, whether the man wanted the job or not.

Jack looked up at Luke again and this time the doctor could easily see the emotion that the older man was feeling. Fear and desperation shone out of Jack's eyes as he said quietly, "Anyway, this whole discussion may be academic. Angelique might still refuse to marry me."

Luke stood abruptly, saying firmly, "Don't underestimate those sisters, Jack. A lot of people have made that mistake. I don't think there's anything in the universe they can't do if they set their minds to it. Trust them. And trust me. I'm a doctor, after all"

Jack took a deep breath and pushed himself up out of the chair, half-laughing as he said, "OK, Doc, if you say so. Now let's go and haul all Angelique's clothes up from the ship. Maybe when she looks at her wedding dress again, she'll decide to go through with it, just so she can dress up for the day."

Luke laughed and thumped Jack on the back as they left the drawing room, hiding his other hand so the older man couldn't see that the doctor had his fingers firmly crossed.

{Chapter 1} {[Chapter 2](#)} {[Chapter 3](#)}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five A

{[Part 1: A Marriage of Inconvenience](#)}