

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

by [The Space Witches](#)



A battle of the minds... but will it cost Angel hers?

Chapter 3

"Destination achieved. Maintaining invisibility shield. Please provide further instructions." The soft female tones jerked Galen from his doze. He'd been doing that more and more often recently, spending hours drifting in and out of sleep, never finding the deep slumber he so desperately needed, but neither able to rouse himself into complete wakefulness.

A few days before, something had brought him abruptly from his state of somnolence: something strange and frightening. A surge of power had swept through the Mage's body, setting his implants aflame, sending excruciating stabs of exquisite pain rushing through his nerve endings, leaving him screaming in agony until he thought his throat would tear and hemorrhage.

Galen had never felt anything like it before. It was dark and powerful, a force like none he'd ever experienced. It was reminiscent of the power of the Shadows. He remembered the scream their ships made as they attacked, and the effect of this new surge of power on his mind was similar.

It had felt as if a great eye had opened, an angry eye, searching the heavens, seeking something lost, something for which the power grieved and yearned. Galen's heart had gone out to the

power, feeling its pain and sense of loss, feeling the longing that echoed his own grief, but on a scale he found almost unbearable.

The Mage had wanted to call out to the power, to tell it he understood. He knew loss better than anyone in the universe. He had lost his parents, he had lost his love, Isabelle, he had lost his teacher, Elric, he had lost all of his friends, and finally lost his people and his home. No one understood loss better than Galen.

As the pain had played along his nerves, convulsing his body with agony, his mind had floated free, aware but unaffected, and for a moment Galen had wondered whether this was death. Was he finally slipping free of his warped and tortured body? Was he at last going to find peace? Just as he thought he might, the power had withdrawn. The great searching eye had closed, and the grief and anger had withdrawn. Galen's contact had been abruptly terminated, and he had found himself curled on the floor of his ship, howling, weeping, and racked with pain.

Galen had screamed for the searcher to return, to finish the job it had started, to release him from his torment, but the universe had remained silent. Whatever that power had been, whatever had awoken it, was over. The power slept again, and Galen wept. His chance of release had gone. He had lifted himself slowly and painfully from the floor, and moved to his hygiene area, where he had stripped himself of clothes sodden with sweat and other body fluids. When he had finished cleaning himself, he had done something he'd avoided in recent years. He had looked at himself in a mirror.

While never vain about his appearance, Galen had always kept his body well toned and fit when he was younger. Now his limbs were twisted, his body warped, and his skin pasty and mottled. The implants had started to emerge from within him, erupting through his skin, leaving festering sores on his chest and back. As the implants disconnected from his nervous system they caused excruciating pain, and his control of his powers diminished.

Galen had looked at the wreck of his body and knew that his time was running out. Unless he found a cure for what ailed him within a very short time now, he would lose all control of his mind and his body, and remain imprisoned inside the festering remnants, until death came creeping slowly and painfully to take him.

Now his ship had arrived at the last place Galen would ever have guessed he would seek help. He had come to the home of the Witches, to the source of their evil, in the hope of finding something that would reverse the ravages his Shadow technology had wrought upon his body. The Mage would have laughed at the irony of his position if he had still been capable of laughter. Instead, a tortured croak emerged from his throat, as he gasped instructions to his ship.

"Ship, maintain invisibility and circle the planet. Scan the surface for signs of the masters' technology. Alert me when you have found it."

The ship dropped into a fast, tight orbit of the planet, which would soon cover the whole sphere. Galen knew he should really search for other ships in orbit before he started on the planet below, but he was too tired, too weary to call out more instructions. He would carry out a scan of what was above him once he had landed. Galen had slipped into another restless doze when the ship called to him.

"Shadow technology detected. Please provide further instructions."

Galen roused himself and called for a window to appear in front of him. "Ship, display findings."

The window lit up and in the center was something that made Galen gasp and sit forward in his seat. It wasn't ancient Shadow tech. It wasn't something he might have to investigate for weeks or months to see if it could be useful to him. It was something much better, or perhaps much worse. It was a Technomage ship, and it had golden dragons on its delta wings.

Galen sat back carefully in his chair, pulling his hood over his head as he pondered his next actions. Alwyn had once been his friend, and had never followed the dictates of the Technomage council. Alwyn might just help Galen, if he saw how sick his old friend was. And Alwyn was a healer, probably best able of all the Mages to help Galen now.

The problem was that Alwyn had also been the one who had broken Galen's staff and banished him, condemning him to this slow, agonizing death. Would Alwyn help? Or would he just finish the job he had started.

Galen found that he didn't really care. Death or a cure would be equally welcome. And in his searching for a cure, Galen had found something he could use, if Alwyn turned against him. This time, he would not be so vulnerable to the older Mage's attack, unless he chose to allow that vulnerability.

Whichever way he wanted this to end, it seemed that the answers for Galen lay on the planet below.

"Ship, maintain cloak and descend." Galen decided to conceal his ship while he investigated. No point taking unnecessary risks.

The sick Mage leaned forward again, looking intently at the window in front of him as his ship dropped through the atmosphere.

Alwyn sat with an avuncular smile on his face, watching the people around him as they relaxed and played together. Although they had left the children behind at the castle, the Mage often thought that this group of people who had become his friends were just youngsters, when compared to his own great age and experience. By comparison with him, they were all children.

Sitting in the comfortable chair he had conjured for himself, Alwyn's gaze shifted around the group. First his eyes came to rest on Ilas, in many ways the most childlike of all the adults gathered for the picnic. The charming shape-shifter had maintained her white-faced, blue haired, oriental appearance during this visit, and was dressed in rich blue velvets that complemented her chosen coloring. She sat cross-legged on a cushion, feeding strawberries to Max Eilerson, who lay on a rug next to Ilas, grinning up at her.

Alwyn couldn't remember when he'd seen Max look so relaxed and at ease. All his usual pomposity and defensive superiority had flowed away from him, and he looked younger and happier as a result. Over the last few days, Max had even brought himself to apologize to Matthew Gideon, thereby healing the rift that had existed between the two men for several

years. The damage done to Max's relationship with his partners after the incidents on Cygnus 36 eight years before, when they had nearly lost Vya to the inhabitant of an Apocalypse Box, and Lily had come close to death, also seemed repaired. Dureena and Ilas both seemed to have forgiven Max for his avarice and stupidity, which had led to that unfortunate sequence of events.

The Mage looked up, trying to see where Dureena had gone off to, as she had left to walk and talk with Sarah and Luke, and Alwyn was always eager for Sarah to return to his side. He couldn't imagine how he had lived so many years alone, and thanked the universe every day for having sent him Sarah and Jaysen. A silent chirp in his head reminded the Mage that he hadn't been entirely alone through those years, and he sent a mental wave to Ishtar, along with the thought, *[Yes, yes, I know you were always with me, but you're not quite as much fun in bed as Sarah. You snore.]*

Ishtar's mental snort of contempt and amusement made Alwyn smile again, as he shifted his gaze to the next couple sitting on the ground across the picnic cloth from him. Lily's head was bent low as she pierced the stems of the flowers she had gathered earlier. She had made everyone laugh as she'd crawled around the pale green ground covering, using her dagger to cut through the tough stems of the green daisy like flowers that grew there. Once she had



gathered enough, she had returned to the group, and sat cross-legged, making the Eriadne equivalent of a daisy chain.

As Alwyn watched, she finished her task and looked up with a bright smile, her eyes twinkling as she tried to crown John Matheson's head with the flowers. John laughed and tussled with her, refusing to wear his coronet of flowers, eventually succeeding in placing it on Lily's head, where the vivid green flowers peeked out from her flaming red curls, matching her emerald eyes. Lily laughed merrily as she leaped to her feet and did a little dance of joy, showing everyone her new crown.

John bowed low, saying, "All hail Queen Lilith, Empress of Eriadne and conqueror of small flowers and hearts."

Amid the laughter that followed, Alwyn watched as Lily dropped lightly to her knees, taking John's face between her hands and kissing him lightly but passionately. The love between the two of them was almost tangible, and the Mage found his attention shifting to the telepathic Captain of the Excalibur.

John Matheson had changed little in a physical sense in the years Alwyn had known him, but his persona and manner had changed immeasurably. When they had first met, John had stood at Matthew Gideon's side, staunchly supporting his Captain, but forever in the shadow of the older man. Since his partnership with Lily and Luke, John seemed to have found his own sunlight, and he was no longer over-shadowed by his former mentor. As Captain of the Excalibur, John had gone on to achieve great things in his own right, and was now seen as a

role model for all young telepaths, showing how telepaths and mundanes could truly work together in partnership.

John bore the responsibility of his role and of others expectations with great dignity. He had grown and matured, and now appeared totally at ease with himself and the universe. Most of all he was happy, and that happiness glowed in his face as he looked up at his wife and mistress.

Continuing around the circle, Alwyn came to Matthew and Demon, where they lay stretched out on the moss together. Matthew lay behind Demon, spooning her back, his right arm resting around her waist. Occasionally, he would lean forward and whisper something in the tall blonde's ear, sometimes making her smile, and once making her blush. Then Matthew had lifted his hand to brush aside Demon's blonde curls, and gently kiss her neck.

This was another man who had changed over the years, his inner anger and frustrations being washed away by his happiness with his lot. Matthew Gideon had what many men dreamed of: a beautiful wife, two healthy, happy children, a job he enjoyed and wealth enough to be a comfort, not a burden. Life had been good to Gideon in the last ten years, and he was sensible enough to know it and enjoy it.

Thinking about one of the Matthew Gideons inevitably brought Alwyn's thoughts to the other, and his eyes shifted to the last couple who sat around the picnic circle. Jack Gideon's position was a mirror image of Matthew's, as he lay with his front pressed against Angel's back. The raven haired beauty lay in front of her new husband, and Alwyn smiled as he watched her wriggling her butt against Jack, making him grin, then lean forward to whisper in his wife's ear. The Mage had no doubt about the effect Angel's movement was having on Jack, and he was amused to see the light tap on the butt the witch received from her husband, no doubt in promise of more later. It looked as if Angel was due for a spanking, which Alwyn had no doubt she'd thoroughly enjoy.

Looking at Jack Gideon's face, Alwyn could see the differences between the two versions of the same man. This Gideon had not enjoyed much happiness in his life up to now. His face still bore the signs of the bitter loneliness he had endured, as well as the sense of failure, frustration and overwhelming anger at what his universe had done to him and the rest of the human race. But those signs were now only visible to the heightened senses of a Technomage. The marks of misery were being smoothed away, covered over by the happiness Jack Gideon had now discovered, in his love for Angel.

That love was returned in full, and Alwyn smiled to himself as he watched Angel wriggle around, turning herself to face her husband, pulling his head down into a passionate kiss. For all his concerns about Angel's powers, Alwyn couldn't help rejoicing in her happiness. The raven haired witch had walked a long, hard road, full of pain, and it was only right that she should be rewarded for the efforts she had made to change herself, to grow up into a more considerate caring person than the brat she had once been. Angel deserved this happiness.

Another silent chirp in his head alerted Alwyn to lift his eyes toward the Carillon Gap, where he saw Sarah, Luke and Dureena returning from their walk. The little Zanderi's head was down and when Alwyn narrowed his eyes and used his extra senses, he could tell that she was struggling to keep up with the long strides of her companions, but she obviously refused to ask them to slow down, to make allowances for her shorter legs. Dureena was trying valiantly

to pretend she was still as fit and lithe as she had always been, but to the Technomage healer's trained eye, the signs of aging were clear.

In Zanderi terms, Dureena was now beyond her middle years and approaching old age. While her clothes were still fitted tightly to her stunning body, Alwyn could see that where once the leather had clung to the firm curves, now the clothes supported and held in flesh grown less taut with the passing of years. The little thief didn't even try to hide the streaks of gray that marked her hair, but she worked hard to make her body look as good as it ever had, and to keep up the lithe strength she had always possessed. But the struggle was becoming harder, and Alwyn could see that in the not too distant future, the beautiful Zanderi would start to lose the battle.

With a sigh of sadness, Alwyn shifted his gaze to Luke Raven, who walked between Dureena and Sarah, his hands in his pockets, frowning in concentration as he listened to Sarah speak. The tall, lean man showed the passing of time much less than Dureena. A few silver hairs shone among the silky locks that flopped forward into Luke's eyes, causing him to shake his head impatiently.

As the trio approached the group sitting around the picnic area, Luke looked up and saw Lily and John, sitting together, John watching while Lily made another daisy chain, stubbornly determined to make John wear his crown of flowers. Alwyn smiled, thinking that Lily had met her match, then watched as Luke joined his lovers, dropping to his knees and taking them both into his arms, hugging them both and kissing each in turn.

Alwyn looked up as the love of his life approached his chair, smiling as she asked, "Why do you get a chair when everyone else sits on the ground?"

Before Alwyn could reply, Matt butted in, "That's just what I asked, Sarah, but he told me if I wanted a chair I should go conjure one for myself!"

Sarah laughed and leaned forward to kiss her Mage, then whispered, "You could at least make it big enough for two to sit in."

Alwyn gazed up at his dark beauty and smiled, "But then you wouldn't sit on my knee."

Sarah laughed and lowered herself carefully, to sit across Alwyn's lap. For all her slenderness, she wasn't the lightest woman present by far, so the Mage shifted until he got her comfortably positioned, with his arm around her, the warmth of her butt starting to produce a responding warmth in his groin.

"Did you have a nice walk?" Alwyn asked, as Sarah looked at him, smiling.

"Yes. I've never been up here before. The view is spectacular, although the drop off the edge of the Gap is quite scary. It's one hell of a long way down! I can hardly blame Demon for staying well away from it."

Before Alwyn could respond, a mental alert sounded in his head. His ship was trying to attract his attention. But why? He closed his eyes and focused on the readings the ship was sending to him. Something wasn't right. There was a disturbance in the atmosphere and it was getting worse, getting closer, getting stronger with every second that passed.

Alwyn concentrated harder. He pulled in all the data his ship had been silently collecting while it sat quiescent behind them. Had one of the Eriadne predators somehow breached the shield he had created? Was that the danger that approached, alerting his senses, making his implants tingle with alarm and anxiety?

"Alwyn? Is something wrong?"

The Mage ignored his partner's anxious voice, concentrating hard. A quote from MacBeth flitted across his mind:

"By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes."

Galen watched in silence and growing anger, as the two doctors and Dureena returned to the group picnicking near the deep ravine. He had brought his ship in close to the edge, landing it carefully on the most stable piece of ground his sensors could detect. Then he had waited. Waited and watched, trying to decide what action to take next.

All these people--except the witches--had once been his friends. He had enjoyed adventures, laughter, happiness, tears and grief with them all. Now he was an outcast, while they kept their happiness to themselves, excluding him, casting him out into the darkness of solitude. They cared about each other, but they didn't care for him. Given a choice, most of them would probably prefer him to die quietly somewhere, without ever bothering them again.

Galen's eyes narrowed as he focused his attention on Matthew Gideon. Or rather on both of them. In both this universe and the other, the Mage had saved Matthew Gideon's life more times than he could remember. Without Galen, Matthew wouldn't have lived to enjoy the prosperous, happy life he now so obviously enjoyed. Worst of all, this new intruder, the new Matthew Gideon, arrived from an alternate reality, had obviously found happiness with the woman Galen had so badly wanted for himself.

Although he had resigned himself years before to never expecting Angel to return his affection, Galen's mouth filled with the bile of bitter jealousy as he watched this new Gideon holding the beautiful witch in his arms, loving her, kissing her, and so obviously having all his adoration fully returned.

It wasn't fair. None of this was fair. Why should these people have so much happiness when Galen had nothing but pain and loneliness? Why should the witches continue to live with their Vorlon enhanced powers, while Galen's Shadow technology was killing him, slowly and painfully?

Thinking of the Vorlons brought Galen's attention into sharp focus on one of the witches. The so appropriately named Demon. Wife of Matthew Gideon, mother of his children, and carrier of the great enemy. She was the true abomination. Perhaps the other witches could be forgiven, considered victims of the Vorlon, but not Demon. She held within her something that could not be allowed to live. There was no place for any part of a Vorlon on this side of the Rim. Just as the Masters had been banished, so had the Vorlons, and the universe remained out of balance as long as the part of the enemy that Demon carried survived.

Flashes of pain started to surge through Galen's implants as his anger built. His control over

his powers started to slip, and he knew what he must do. His own needs, his own agony and pain, all must be ignored. He had allowed himself to be diverted from his cause for too long. He had covered in darkness for years, when he should have finished the job he had started so long ago.

All other thoughts fled Galen's mind as he pushed himself to his feet and staggered toward the exit of his ship. He retained only one purpose, only one goal, which had to be achieved this time, or he would die in the attempt.

Demon must die.

Alwyn surged to his feet, pushing Sarah abruptly to one side, preparing himself for battle. He cried out a warning to the others, urging them to take cover inside his ship, then he turned to face the newcomer.

He wasn't sure how he knew that this ship was dangerous. He wasn't even sure exactly who the intruder was. As he gradually pierced the shadows hiding the ship perched on the edge of the ravine, Alwyn didn't know which Technomage lurked inside. It could have been any of the survivors of his kind, although they grew fewer in numbers with every year that passed, as no new Mages could be created since the Shadows had departed this universe, taking their technology with them.

Jack Gideon looked up at Alwyn, puzzled by his shout, asking, "What's the problem? Why should we hide in your ship?" He jumped to his feet and quickly pulled Angel up to stand alongside him. The others asked the same questions, all standing and moving toward the Technomage.

This meant that their backs were turned when the other ship shimmered into visibility. Alwyn called out another warning, and they all whipped around to see the ramp of the ship descending, and the figure emerging from the darkness within.

Taking a defensive stance, Alwyn quickly connected with his ship's sensors, trying to scan the other ship and identify it. How had it managed to get so close to his own ship without being detected? His scanners should have been able to sense any intruder approaching, animal or technical. His shields should have been able to repel any assault from outside, and alarms should have been set off before the shields were breached. Yet the intruder had managed to get a ship inside the shields, and remain undetected. How long had the ship been sitting there, watching them, before Alwyn's sensors had finally picked it up? Who had been able to circumvent his defenses like this?

Alwyn groaned as he recognized the figure. He had fervently hoped that his path would never cross with Galen's again. He didn't want to have to kill the younger man, and he feared he would have to, if they ever again encountered each other. Alwyn remembered the promise he had given Elric so many years ago, when Galen had been barely more than an apprentice, before Elric had led most of their kind into hiding. Alwyn had promised to protect Galen if he could. He had broken that promise to defend Demon from Galen's attack, and it looked as if he was going to have to break the promise again now.

Pushing all his sadness and regrets to one side, Alwyn summoned his powers, ready to defend

his friends if Galen attacked. Lifting his hand, he conjured a fireball into existence with a gesture, and called out to the younger Mage, who now stood silently at the foot of the ramp, his head covered by the hood of his coat, his face still concealed from his audience.

The others had now moved to stand beside Alwyn, and silence had fallen. Alwyn flicked his eyes from side to side, wishing that they would all do as he asked, and retreat to the shelter of the ship. This battle would be much easier without witnesses and alternative targets. If this was going to be the final confrontation between the two Mages, Alwyn wanted it to be one on one, a last battle, until only one of them survived. The last thing he wanted was for others to be injured or killed in the fallout of the battle.

"Galen, leave. Nothing good can come of you being here." Alwyn called out the warning, the heat of his fireball warming his hand as he held it back, reining back the power until he needed it.

The voice that emerged from the hooded figure was barely recognizable. Instead of the sonorous tones Galen had once used, a croaking, wheezing sound could be heard, from which Alwyn could barely pick out the words.

"You're wrong Alwyn. One good thing can come of it. Death. Mine or another's. And I don't plan to die today. At least not by your hand."

Alwyn sensed movement around him and realized that the others had shifted their positions, pushing Demon toward the back of the group. They knew as well as he did whose death Galen desired, and Alwyn knew many of his friends would give their lives protecting the tall blonde. But he couldn't allow it to come to that.

Lifting his hand, ready to release the weapon of destruction he held, Alwyn called out, his voice full of sadness, "Galen, don't make me prove you wrong." If there was choice between Demon's life and Galen's, there was no choice. Galen would have to die, so Demon could live.



The laughter that emerged from the hooded figure surprised Alwyn. He hadn't expected that, and it made him angry, building his powers and sending ripples of energy surging through his implants. Was Galen so sure of himself? Then Alwyn would show him his mistake.

The older Mage stepped forward, and as he did so, he stumbled. Something was wrong. His legs wouldn't hold him up. He fell to his knees, the fireball in his hand dissipating as the world swam around him. Alwyn felt distant, somehow disassociated from the place and people around him. Everything was swimming in and out of focus. He felt sick and dizzy, out of balance.

Alwyn tried to summon the power of his implants to support and sustain him, to help him overcome whatever curse Galen had laid over him. Then he realized what Galen had done. Somehow the younger Mage had turned off Alwyn's implants. They were dead weights within him, delivering nothing. The absence of the power made Alwyn weaker than any human. He had been joined with it so long, he was completely unable to function without it.

Blackness swarmed around Alwyn's head, as sight deserted him. Other senses shut down, one

by one, until only sound remained. The last thing Alwyn heard was Sarah's cry of fear, then everything ended.

Gideon stood in front of his wife, for the moment observing silently, allowing Alwyn to take the lead. [Dammit, I should know better than to come out unarmed!] He cursed his stupidity in leaving his PPG behind at the castle. A quick glance at Jack had confirmed that he, too, had left the castle without a gun. Who could have foreseen the need for a PPG on a quiet picnic, with Alwyn creating a defensive shield around them?

It didn't sit comfortably, allowing the older Mage to lead the defense of Gideon's wife, but the retired Captain knew he had little choice. Alwyn at least had his own powers, which he'd used before to defeat Galen. It was best to allow him to do the same again.

Apart from the logic of the situation, Gideon was having problems of his own, keeping his wife under control. Deborah wasn't keen on the idea of allowing others to defend her against the Mage who had tried to kill her. Her usually warm, kindly eyes were flashing with fire as she looked at Galen. This man had nearly cost Deborah her life and the life of her daughter. He had also damaged her so badly she could never bear children again. Deborah wanted Galen's blood. [And some other bits of his anatomy as souvenirs, no doubt!]

And if Deborah was looking for revenge, her sisters were willing to help. Max was trying to hold Dureena and Ilas back, reminding Gideon that these three had their own reasons for hating Galen: he had helped the murderer of their first child to escape from justice. Next to them, John and Luke both struggled with Lily. The little red head was hissing, her tiny sharp teeth bared as she glared at Galen. Gideon decided he wouldn't like to have those teeth sunk into any part of him; they looked very sharp indeed.

Angel was reacting more calmly than her sisters, allowing Jack to hold her, but Gideon sensed that the raven haired witch was just biding her time. If Alwyn couldn't control Galen, Gideon had no doubt that Angel would use her psycho-kinetic powers to knock the younger Technomage six ways from Wednesday.

No one was more shocked than Gideon when Alwyn collapsed with a groan, leaving Sarah to rush to his side.

[Oh, fuck it,] was the only thought that sounded in Gideon's mind as he surged forward. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Now he had no choice. He had to get involved, as there was no way in this universe Galen was going to attack Deborah again. He just wasn't quite sure how he was going to kill a Technomage with his bare hands, and he suspected he might die trying, but he had to distract Galen at least, giving the sisters time to gather their powers to deal with him.

Galen laughed with satisfaction as Alwyn collapsed in front of him. It had almost been too easy. Using the spells he had learned in his travels to turn off the implants of other Mages made winning effortless. Now it was time to turn his attention to the real enemy, the one who threatened the balance of the universe.

The Mage strode forward, hardly conscious of Sarah Chambers crying out as she fell to her knees at Alwyn's side, trying to revive him. Galen's focus was on the tall blonde, who stood behind the others, pushed back by her husband, who now rushed forward, ready to defend his wife with his life.

Gideon yelled out, "Not this time, Galen! You nearly took my wife and daughter from me once. I'm not going to let you do it again!"

Gideon's challenge was echoed by Demon's shriek of dismay as she watched her husband lunge toward his doom. She struggled with her sisters, who were now holding the tall blonde back, as she tried to join in the attack.

Galen shifted his gaze quickly to the man running toward him, almost distracted from his goal by a moment of sadness. Having saved Matthew Gideon so many times, was it now his fate to end his life? What the Mage had given so generously and so often, was it now time to take away?

Galen paused, holding back for a moment, but then the decision was taken from him. Matthew continued his headlong surge, attacking him. But he was not alone. The other Matthew accompanied him.

The Mage was momentarily confused. Which Matthew should he attack? Which one was *his* Matthew? For a second he wasn't sure. He didn't really want to kill either of them, but their aggressive approach left him with little alternative.

"And so it begins." Galen breathed the words to himself as he prepared to kill the man who had once been his best friend. But hesitation made the Mage's attack less accurate than usual. The fireball that had been intended to take one of his attackers in the chest fell short of its target. It struck Matthew in his right leg, almost severing it with the force of the impact. With a scream of agony, one of the Matthews fell to the ground, while the other was thrown aside, knocked unconscious by the force of the blast.

Galen turned his attention back to the rest of the group, focusing on his true target. This time she would not escape him.

Angel screamed as she watched Jack fall. She couldn't believe this was happening. How had this all gone so wrong, so fast? Was the universe so against her? Would it never allow her more than fleeting moments of happiness, followed by years of anguish and pain?

She had watched the confrontation between Alwyn and Galen calmly, holding back, confident that the older Mage could handle the situation. Having seen Alwyn strip Galen of his staff and much of his power, it never occurred to Angel that things would be different this time. She hadn't even thought to summon her own powers to assist. She wanted to watch Galen die, and this time, she was sure Alwyn would finish the job.

All calm deserted Angel when first Alwyn fell, then Galen attacked the two men rushing toward him. Racing forward to where her husband lay, Angel was barely conscious of Luke rushing to join her, or of Demon screaming out for Matthew, struggling to escape from John, who was still trying to keep between her and Galen, protecting his friend's wife with his body. Lily and

Max moved to help John, Sarah rushed to check on Matt, while Ilas and Dureena both turned to attack Galen.

Dropping to her knees, Angel gently lifted Jack's head, cradling it in her lap, stroking his hair back from his face. Tears streamed down her face, and dropped onto Jack's waxen cheeks as Angel begged, "Don't leave me, Jack, please don't leave me."

An awful sense of déjà vu descended over Angel. She had been here before, had done this before. This wasn't the first time the man she loved had laid dying in her arms on Eriadne. Years before it had been Matt's body she had cradled in her arms, Matt who she had begged not to die. Now it was Jack, who meant more to her than life itself, and this time there was no Lucas Buck standing by to save him. This time, Lucas wasn't here to take part of the injury into himself. This time, Jack was going to die.

Luke was doing something to Jack's leg, ripping the pants aside, then tearing his own shirt off, using it to tie a tourniquet above the gaping wound, which was pumping blood out onto the ground. Angel knew enough from her years of working in Medbay to know that Jack's chances of survival were slim. She looked up at Luke and cried, "Save him for me, Luke. Please don't let him die!"

Deep down, Angel knew it was hopeless. This was the way it was meant to be. She wasn't allowed to have happiness. Joy was forbidden to her. Any man she loved and who loved her was condemned to die. That was her destiny and her fate. She should have known better than to ever dream that things could be different.

The doctor's dark, brown eyes were filled with sadness as he looked up at Angel, and she could see the doubts he harbored, but he tried to smile as he reassured her, "I'll do everything I can, Angel, but we need to get him out of here. Can you help me get him onto Alwyn's ship?"

Angel nodded, gathering her powers and lifting her husband's limp body with her mind. She blocked out the sounds of the screams around her, blocked out the battle that was being waged just meters away, and left the field. Only one thing mattered to Angel at that moment: Jack must live. He had to live. Without him, Angel knew she would go mad, and she had no idea what would happen then.

Angel's tears streamed down her face as she turned her back on her sisters and walked away, carrying her dying husband to safety.

Demon barely noticed as Angel and Luke carried Jack's body into Alwyn's ship. She was too busy trying to build a link with her sisters, trying to fight Galen with the little power they still possessed. Matthew lay unconscious nearby, but Demon knew he wasn't badly hurt. After Galen had attacked Jack and Matthew, Sarah had left Alwyn for a moment to check on Matthew, and had called out to Demon that her husband was just knocked out. The doctor had then returned to her mate, trying to bring him back to consciousness.

While this had been going on, Demon had been struggling with John, Lily and Max, begging them to let her go to Matthew. They'd been forced to release her when Galen had sent Ilas and Dureena crashing back into the group, their attack on the Mage having utterly failed.

Demon had given a brief moment of silent thanks that Galen hadn't used another fireball, then grabbed Ilas and Lily, pulling them toward her as she said, "We have to link. It's the only way we can fight him." This time Demon wasn't going to be the defenseless victim she'd been before. This time she would fight Galen. She knew she couldn't win alone, but with her sisters, she at least stood a chance.

Ilas and Lily had hesitated, until John and Max pushed them together. John yelled, "Do it! Max and I will try to distract him."

Max hadn't looked wildly excited by this idea, but he had helped Dureena to her feet, then turned and faced Galen with her and John. Dureena brandished her knife, screaming at Galen as she launched herself fearlessly through the air.

Demon closed her eyes, trying to block out the battle for a moment, concentrating on initiating the link with her sisters. She had to do this. She had to be strong, and protect the others, as they were trying to protect her. The tall blonde knew who Galen really wanted to kill. She had considered throwing herself on the mercy of the rogue Mage, begging him to take her life and spare the others. But once Jack had been injured, Demon knew it was too late.

Galen was out of control. He couldn't have known if it was Jack or Matthew he had hit with his fireball, but he obviously hadn't cared. If the Mage was willing to kill the man who had once been his closest friend, then he would be willing to kill them all.

The tall blonde concentrated hard, feeling her sisters' minds slip into their accustomed places, in sync with hers. It felt odd, unbalanced somehow, because of Angel's absence. While Demon, Angel and Lily had become accustomed to linking without Ilas, this was the first time in years that these three sisters had tried to merge without Angel. For a moment, Demon feared that without her younger sister, who was now the most powerful of the witches, she would be unable to blend their powers and their minds. She tried to link to Angel, calling to her to come back to her sisters, but their link only worked when they were in physical contact now. Angel was too far away to hear her sister's cry.

Some of her fears must have leaked through the link, as Lily's voice sounded in Demon's mind. *[[We can do this! It's just a little harder than usual without Angel. Now concentrate!]]*

Demon could feel all of Lily and Ilas' fears for their partners, who were now struggling with Galen. As she descended into the merge, Demon felt John's telepathic attack on the Mage, as he tried to blanket Galen's mind with a mental fog, cutting off his access to his powers.

The merged being felt Galen's retaliation. A fireball flew from the Technomage's hand, aimed directly at John's heart. The merge barely had time to shift the molecules of the air in front of



John in defense. Somehow, the Ilas part of the merge used her powers to pull the air together into a dense shield, from which the fireball bounced back.

This attracted Galen's attention to them, and the merge now found itself the target of the Mage's attack. They stiffened a defensive shield from the air around them, and the Lily part of the merge used her prescience to sense each attack before

Galen launched it, allowing them to strengthen the shield just in the area needed. Drawing the Mage's attention to themselves allowed John time to pull Max and Dureena out of the immediate battle zone. Both had fallen in their initial attack, and both now lay unconscious.

The Demon part of the merge knew that they had little time left, and there was no one left to help the sisters. Alwyn was still unconscious, with Sarah at his side. Matthew, Dureena and Max all lay stunned, with only John to defend them. Angel and Luke were still inside Alwyn's ship, trying to save Jack's life. The only force left that stood any chance of resisting Galen's murderous assault was the merge.

Fireball after fireball rained down on the sisters, who could do little other than defend themselves, and draw the Mage's fire. The shield they had created around themselves was standing up to the attack, but the merge knew it couldn't last forever. Without Angel, they had no real aggressive power. It was her strength that had always fueled their attacks. Angel's psycho-kinesis had been the force they had used to destroy. Demon had directed the assault, while Ilas shaped it, and Lily defended them. Without Angel, the sisters could only try to defend themselves and their partners.

The ground shifted under the women, sending them staggering as they were beaten down by Galen's assault. The Mage had thrown back the hood of his coat, and the merge could now see his scarred and twisted face. Any remaining vestige of his once handsome and striking looks was distorted by the rage and hatred that ruled his expression.

Deep inside the merge, Demon knew that this was the last battle the sisters would ever fight. This was the one they were going to lose. They were being driven back slowly, moving ever closer to the edge of the ravine, the air within the defensive shield growing hot and stale. Soon they would be forced to lower their defenses, or suffocate. Either that or they would be forced over the edge of the Carillon Gap, to be lost in the depths below.

The merge cried out with their minds to the one force that might still be able to help them. They called for their missing sister. The individual links between the sisters were no longer strong enough, but the merged minds somehow established a connection with Angel just long enough to send a single word.

[[Help!]]

Angel stood by the side of the table on which Jack was laid, holding his right hand, squeezing it tightly, trying with all her might to drive some of her life force into him, to make him live, to force him to stay with her. [Don't die, Jack. Don't you dare die! You know I can't live without you. You have to stay with me. You must!]

The words went around and around in Angel's head, driving every other thought from her mind. A part of her mind heard her sisters' cry, but she ignored it, too lost in her grief and pain to understand what it meant. She couldn't bear to look at what Luke was doing to Jack's leg, so she focused on her husband's face as he lay unconscious in front of her. His skin was deathly white, taut and waxy, stretched tight across the bones of his face, looking almost skull-like. Hardly aware of the tears that streamed down her face, Angel sniffed and reached out with one hand, brushing back the lock of hair that had stuck to Jack's damp forehead.

As she touched his face, Angel shuddered. Jack's skin was cold and clammy. She moved her fingers to the side of his neck, and she couldn't find a pulse. A wail of dismay rose within her throat, and she shrieked at Luke, "He's dead! Oh goddess, please, no, please, Luke, bring him back, do something, please Luke, please, you have to save him!"

Luke shook his hair out of his eyes, and went on doing whatever he was doing, for the moment so concentrated on his task that he seemed not to hear Angel's cries. She was about to reach out and shake him to attract his attention, when the noise of another person entering the ship made Angel look over her shoulder.

Sarah burst into the room, grabbing Angel by the arm, and pulling her away from Jack's bed. "You have to come! Your sisters need you."

Angel shrugged off the doctor's grip and turned back to her husband. "They'll have to manage without me. I'm staying here."

The dark witch felt an anger growing inside her, matching her grief as it escalated. Didn't Sarah see what was happening here? Angel was losing the only thing that made her want to live. How could her sisters and Sarah expect her to leave Jack? To leave her dying husband, to give up their last seconds together, seconds which would be all Angel would have to light the darkness of the rest of her life.

Angel wanted to put back her head and howl with anguish and rage as Sarah persisted, yelling at her, "There's nothing you can do in here! I'll stay and help Luke, and we'll save Jack if we can, but if you don't get out there right now, your sisters are going to die. There may only be a small chance that Jack will live, but you can believe this, Angel. If you stay here now, your sisters will die. All of them. You're the only hope they have."

Sarah kept shaking Angel's arm as she spoke, reinforcing her words, trying to drag Angel away. Something inside Angel snapped and she used her powers to push the doctor away, screaming, "Enough!"

Sarah span across the room, bouncing off the far wall, and sliding down to sit on the floor, half-stunned by the force Angel had used.

All other emotions drained away and Angel felt nothing but rage as she glared at the fallen woman. She went on, shrieking, "I've had enough of you all! Everyone wants a piece of me, wants something from me, everyone wants me to do things for them. Well, I've had enough of it. I'm going to do what I want for a change, and what I want right now is to be with Jack. Just leave me alone!"

She was shaking with rage as she turned back to Jack, holding his hand tightly. His chest didn't move and Angel knew that she had lost her last seconds with her husband. Even that had been taken from her. The universe hadn't even allowed her the time or the peace to share his passing.

Angel threw her head back and screamed until her throat was raw. This pain was worse than anything she had ever felt before. Worse than losing her mother, worse than losing Michael, worse even than losing her son and Lucas. This loss went deeper, and she knew she would never recover. She felt as if a spike had been driven through her head, her heart and her soul, and the pain would never cease. The grief and the anger burned within her, like a fire that could

never be quenched, a thirst that could never be sated.

Anger built on grief and grief on anger, escalating until Angel lost control. Her powers surged within her, screaming for release, driving her toward the only thing that could give her some relief from the agony of loss. Angel was barely capable of coherent thought but she knew one thing. Knew it deep down, deep inside where the darkness lived.

Revenge would help ease the pain. If she could kill the one responsible for her loss, then maybe it would hurt a little less. And that person was outside the ship, attacking her sisters.

Without even blinking her eyes, Angel visualized where she wanted to be.

And she was there.

Gideon sat upright, rubbing his head, trying to work out what was going on. His vision was clearing, but he still felt nauseous and unsteady, so he wasn't quite sure he believed what he saw, when Angel appeared literally out of nowhere. One second she wasn't there, and then she was.

At first, he hardly recognized the figure as Angel. The being that blinked into view was wearing the same red leather pants and jacket Angel had worn earlier, clinging like a second skin to the same beautiful body, but there most resemblance ended.

Gideon shook his head, pressing his fingers against his skull gingerly. Was it possible he had a concussion? Was he imagining the image in front of him?

He shook his head, trying to clear it and immediately wished he hadn't. It just made the nausea worse. Narrowing his eyes, he focused again on the being before him. She had white hair streaming out behind her, as she hung in the air a couple of meters above the ground, her arms spread wide. Her eyes, which for a second turned on him and glared, were no longer crystal blue, but black. Completely black. Black through and through, from corner to corner, and top to bottom, as if an inner eclipse of the soul somehow shone out through the windows of her eyes. And the face that stared at him was no longer beautiful but contorted with a snarl of hatred, anger and pain.

If this vision was real and not some figment of his concussed imagination, then this was no longer the Angel who Gideon knew. This was a dark, avenging Angel, born from some terrible evil. Gideon shuddered, somehow knowing that this Angel would attack anyone and everyone who stood in her way. This Angel was mad with grief and despair, and God help anyone who tried to stand up to her, as no one else could.

Gideon had been so transfixed by the sudden appearance of the avenging Angel, that it was a few seconds before he looked around to see what else was happening. He remembered rushing at Galen, Jack at his side, but there was now no sign of Jack. No sign other than a pool of blood staining the dark green ground covering. Gideon now knew the explanation for Angel's anger and grief. Jack must have been hurt. Or worse.

Shaking his head again in a futile attempt to clear it, Gideon looked around, seeing for the first time the other members of his family scattered around the picnic area. John bent low over

Dureena, giving her CPR, while Max lay unconscious, or worse, nearby, with Alwyn still stretched out unmoving on the ground beyond him. Of Luke and Sarah there was no sign, and Gideon could only hope that meant they were occupied inside the ship, keeping Jack alive. Although Angel's appearance and grief made that unlikely.

If all that weren't enough, Gideon finally realized that the battle was still going on, silently, on the far side of Galen's ship. The sisters had somehow been pushed to the edge of the precipice, and were now standing, arms linked, heads touching, surrounded by a cocoon of fire. The women were barely visible through the shimmering haze of heat that enclosed them, and Gideon realized, to his horror, that they were unable to do anything but defend themselves inside their shield. Galen stood before them, also close to the edge of the Gap, throwing fireball after fireball at their shield, heating the air around them, slowly burning them alive.

Gideon tried to push himself to his feet, needing to get to his wife, not knowing how he could rescue her, but knowing he would give his life happily if it would somehow save hers. His legs wouldn't co-operate at first and his knees kept buckling under him, but eventually he managed to push himself upright and set off toward his wife.

Before he could stagger more than a few paces, Angel struck. She swooped down from her position in mid-air, and pointed her hand at Galen. A bolt of what looked like black lightning burst from her fingers, and Gideon quickly covered his ears, trying to block out the accompanying shriek of sound. He had only heard a noise like that three times in his life before, and each time, it had been when a Shadow hybrid ship had been attacking.

The noise had given him a pounding headache then, and Gideon winced now as Angel let out that same shriek as she attacked, her mouth wide open, her eyes black at the skin of a Shadow ship, her white hair streaming out behind her as the bolt struck its target in the middle of his back. Gideon's head was already pounding fit to burst and he really didn't need the extra insult to his poor, tortured brains.

Galen staggered forward as the unexpected attack knocked him off balance, but it had little other effect. Gideon couldn't understand how the Mage could have survived such an assault. That black lightning looked as if it should have sucked the very life out of Galen, but somehow, he still stood. He flung one last fireball at the sisters, then turned to face his new enemy.

Gideon watched Galen's face change as he realized the identity of his attacker. Some of the anger and insanity appeared to drain away, and Gideon saw the Mage's lips move as he said, "No, please. I don't want to hurt you."

Angel let out another Shadow shriek as she loosed another bolt of darkness, this time hitting the Mage in the middle of his chest, sending him staggering back a few paces closer to the edge of the cliff.

Galen straightened and unleashed a fireball, then raised a shield of blue fire around himself. Whatever reluctance he had felt about harming Angel seemed to have been overcome. But Angel dodged the fireball easily, moving through the air quickly, always remaining a couple of meters off the ground. Then she let loose another bolt of darkness, striking the Technomage's shield, driving sparks of blue into the air around him.

Gideon watched the two battling as he circled around, getting closer to his wife and her sisters,

while being careful to avoid the blasts of power that bounced off Galen's shield. His head hurt and his knees wobbled; the last thing he needed was to get knocked out again by a ricochet from the battle. The Mage's shield kept Angel's blasts from injuring him, but it couldn't absorb the kinetic energy of the bolts. As each blast pounded into Galen's shield, he was driven back, closer and closer to the edge, and with every blow, the shield flared and flickered.

Finally reaching the sisters, Gideon found that they had dropped their own shield and collapsed. He pulled Deborah into his arms, checking her pulse, finding it was slow and thready, but she was alive. Ilas sat nearby in her natural form, not having enough energy left to maintain her usual appearance, holding Lily gently. The shape-shifter looked up and nodded at Gideon as he asked, "Are you OK?"

Ilas coughed quietly, then said, "We are for the moment. But if Galen attacks again..."

Gideon nodded. He knew the sisters didn't have enough power left to withstand another attack. Gathering Deborah into his arms, he kissed her forehead gently, vowing to himself that whatever happened from this point on would happen to the two of them together. He would never leave her again.

Another Shadow shriek dragged Gideon's attention upwards, and he realized that Angel was speaking. The words were distorted by rage and grief, mingling with the shriek but just comprehensible. Gideon wasn't sure how a human throat could produce such a sound but he concentrated on what Angel was saying, and could just make out the words.

"I've had *enough* of you, Galen! I've had *enough* of you, and every other being in this universe. You all want to hurt me, you all want to take something from me, and I've had *enough*!"

With each repetition of the word, Angel flung another bolt of blackness at the Mage, whose shield was darkening with every blow, trying to absorb the force being smashed into it. Galen had stopped firing off fireballs, needing to marshal his energies into defending himself from Angel's blasts, but now his shield was flickering, jagged edges of fire flaring into life as every new bolt hit home.

Gideon wondered for a moment where all that power was coming from, then he remembered what Deborah had said after the sisters had merged on arriving on Eriadne. Angel had been holding something back when they'd talked about what had happened. Well, Angel certainly wasn't holding back now.

Another shriek, another blast and now Galen almost lost his footing as the edge of the precipice crumbled under him. He regained his balance long enough to scream out to Angel, "No! I never meant to harm you! I always wanted to save you. I did save your life once, Angel, remember that. Deep inside you, you still carry some of my blood, and Technomage nanomites. You're the one most like us, Angel. You're the next step. You're what Technomages could have become, if the Masters hadn't left us. You don't need the implants. You *are* the magic and the power!"

As Galen spoke, Gideon wondered if he should try to intervene. Should he try to stop this? Would either Galen or Angel listen to him? He remembered a time when he'd noted the similarity of their names. The same letters, just differently sequenced, and both spelling Trouble with a capital T. Well, he'd never realized that their similarities went so deep. Galen had confessed to him long ago that Mages were born of Shadow technology. If Gideon had

understood Galen's words correctly, it seemed that Angel was also somehow connected to the Shadows, although Gideon couldn't imagine how.

The thoughts raced through Gideon's brain, and he opened his mouth, ready to call out, begging his one time friend and sister-in-law to stop, but events had moved on too quickly for him to intercede.

Galen's words might as well have remained unspoken for all the attention Angel gave them. The Shadow shriek came from Angel's tortured throat again as she screamed, "Fly, Technomage! Let's see if your magic helps you fly!"

Unleashing another bolt of power, Angel launched it at the Mage. Galen staggered back as it hit him, his feet slipping on the unstable ground beneath him.

For a moment, he teetered on the brink, his arms windmilling madly as he tried to keep his balance. Gideon held his breath, wondering if at the last, the Mage might conjure some way of pulling himself back.

But just as it looked as if Galen might recover, Angel let rip with another blast. This one smashed into the ground at Galen's feet, blasting both the Mage's shield and that section of the cliff edge out of existence.

Galen hovered unsupported above the void for a moment, and Gideon wondered if the Mage could indeed fly, and would even now recover, attacking Angel again. Looking closely, Gideon could see a flicker of blue light beneath the Mage's feet. Somehow, Galen had created some kind of force field to support him, but for how long?

As Gideon watched, his mind reeling with a mixture of emotions, the Mage's eyes closed, and he appeared to almost resign himself to his fate. The expression on Galen's face became more peaceful than Gideon had ever seen before, and the Mage's whispered words were barely audible.

"And so it ends."

As Galen spoke, the blue of the force-field beneath his feet flickered and died. Galen dropped like a stone, vanishing from Gideon's view, leaving behind only the fleeting image of a last rueful smile.

Gideon wanted to run to the edge of the crevasse, wanted to look down to see if the Mage had really been defeated, or if he was merely marshaling his energies for another attack. The dead weight of Deborah's unconscious form kept the retired Captain from moving. When the seconds ticked by and Galen didn't reappear, Gideon knew he had really gone. The Mage was dead.

A part of Gideon mourned for the loss of his old friend, the man who had saved his life again and again. He mourned for the loss of their friendship, and wondered if there was anything he could have done differently to prevent it coming to this end. A wave of guilt and grief swept through Gideon, then he pushed it all aside as useless. Deep down he knew that Galen was the



master of his own fate and had chosen his own path. He had brought this end upon himself when he had decided to attempt the murder of an innocent, pregnant woman.

The silence that followed Galen's fall was profound. Gideon looked up to see Angel still hovering above the ground, looking over the edge of the cliff. Her face was distorted into a snarl of satisfied glee as she watched for a few seconds, then turned to Gideon, laughing, "He went *splat*. It seems Technomages can't fly. Do you think their ships can do any better without their masters?"

Gideon watched in horror as Angel turned her attention to Galen's ship, where it sat nearby. Launching bolt after bolt of power at the ground under the ship's supports, she slowly undermined it, until it, too, teetered on the edge of the ravine.

Gideon was appalled at the energy Angel was using, wondering where it all came from. She had always had power, but never anything like this. He'd seen her drained after the battle above Stryvsteptix, when she had used much less energy than this. On Cygnus 36, Angel had collapsed, exhausted, after holding Vya in place long enough for them to extract the being that had possessed him. Now she had enough power to kill a Technomage then blast away the ground supporting his ship, and she didn't even look tired.

As the ship listed slowly to one side, then slid silently over the edge of the precipice, Gideon found himself wondering exactly what Angel had become. Was she still the woman he had loved for so many years? Or was that Angel lost to them, destroyed by pain and grief? Was this all there was left? A being full of hatred and fury, who could obliterate people and things with a glance from her soulless black eyes and the wave of her hand.

The crash of the ship hitting the ground at the bottom of the ravine brought Gideon back to the present. As he bent forward, Deborah's eyelids fluttered, and her beautiful golden eyes looked up at him. A wave of relief swept through him when he saw her smile as she recognized who was holding her.

Deborah licked her lips slowly and whispered, "What happened? Who saved us?"

They were good questions, but Gideon was pretty sure Deborah wouldn't like the answers.

Demon struggled to sit upright, leaning back against Matthew's chest. She was more tired than she had ever been in her life before, and she couldn't quite understand why she was still alive. She remembered holding her sisters tightly, saying goodbye to them in the merge, gasping for every breath of searing hot air, as they tried to maintain the shield they had woven around them.

Now, somehow, she was sitting on the ground, with Matthew awake and aware, holding her tightly, and Ilas and Lily sitting nearby. Lily was also sitting upright, rubbing her head and coughing quietly. In the near silence that had fallen, all Demon could hear was a rhythmic thumping sound. When she looked for the source of the noise, she saw John kneeling on the ground, leaning over Dureena, alternately pressing on her chest, then pausing to breathe into her mouth.

Demon watched as Ilas scrambled to her feet and rushed over to help John, leaving Lily to

recover alone. Then Max sat upright, shaking his head, asking loudly, "What's going on? Is it over? Did we win?"

The laughter that followed those words rang out from the sky above them; laughter that sounded more like a scream of pain than anything arising from humor. Demon turned quickly, her mouth falling open in amazement and horror when she saw her sister.

Angel floated above them, her back turned to Demon. She was still dressed in red leather, but her hair had turned white. She had thrown back her head to laugh, and the noise made Demon want to cover her ears, bury her head in Matthew's shoulder and never move again. Instead, she pushed herself upright, taking Matthew's hand as he helped her stand beside him.

Words emerged from Angel's mouth. Words distorted by pain and grief. Words that sounded nothing like Angel's usual soft, sultry tones.

"Did *we* win? No, Max, *we* didn't win. *I* won. Me. All alone, without anyone to help me. As usual. I won. I killed the Technomage and I killed his ship, and I'll kill anything and everything that ever tries to hurt me again, so you'd all better be damned careful. You hear me, Max? And the rest of you? Watch your step and watch your mouths, or you'll go the same way Galen went. Or worse. I could make it last longer, you know. I could burn you slowly, Max, or stretch you until your bones crack and your muscles rip. Tear you apart limb from limb, just by looking at you. Shall I do that, Max? Shall I?"

The look of eager and malicious anticipation on Angel's face as she spoke was terrifying. Demon called out, "No! Angel, stop. You've done enough. Come back to us now, be our sister again."

Demon knew that in defeating the Mage, Angel had called on a part of herself that should never have been aroused. A darkness that lived in the core of Angel, a darkness that fueled her power, which had been growing over the years, as every pain and loss had taken its toll. No one should have had to suffer what Angel had suffered, and Demon would have done anything to spare her sister the pain. But as always, the tall blonde felt useless and guilty. Yet again, she hadn't been able to defend her sisters. Yet again, they'd been hurt by her failure. It was her job to protect them all and she had failed. And this dark Angel, who now hovered vengefully above their heads, was the result of Demon's failure.

Angel laughed that twisted, evil laugh again, and turned in the air to face Demon. The tall blonde shuddered as she saw her sister's eyes. They were completely black; twin pools of malice and evil. Demon couldn't help wondering if her sister had lost her soul.

"Be your sister again? Why should I want that, *Deborah*." Angel spat Demon's real name out like a curse. "What has being your sister ever done for me? We shared a father, but he loved you, while I was just a breeding assignment. He abandoned my mother and me, left us in poverty, while you had wealth and comfort. And when my mother died, you descended on me, like Lady Bountiful, oh so charitable. It must have made you feel wonderful to be so condescendingly generous to your poor little half-sister."

Demon shook her head and tried to speak, but Angel's screech drowned her words. "The only reason you wanted me around was to have someone you could boss about. That was you, Demon. Always having to be in charge, always bossy, always top bitch. Well, I showed you, with your beloved David, didn't I? That showed you who was the real bitch, didn't it?"

The laughter that followed the words tore at Demon's heart. She was hardly aware of the tears streaming down her face as she whispered, "It didn't matter, Angel. None of it mattered. I only wanted to keep you safe."

But Angel didn't hear as she ranted on, "Even after the Vorlons took us, you still had to be the boss bitch. The rest of us would have gone along with their plans, avoiding the pain they inflicted on us. But oh, no! Miss Goody Two-shoes Demon couldn't stand the guilt of her poor, delicate conscience, so we all had to suffer. Why couldn't you have left things alone? We could have been the most powerful beings in the universe after the Vorlons! But you couldn't stand playing second fiddle, could you? So they put us in stasis, and I had to save you all again when we were woken by the Brakiri who wanted to rape us. Yes, *me!* I saved us! But did that make any difference? Oh no, Miss Bossy Boots Demon took charge again."

Demon turned and buried her head in her husband's shoulder, weeping as Angel's voice raged on, going over every slight, every argument the sisters had ever had. The tall blonde knew that Angel had resented her at times during those years, but she had never realized the bitter hatred that had accompanied that resentment. Hatred that now came flooding out, burning like acid into Demon's heart. She couldn't help asking herself why her power had always been limited. Why had she been able to know how everyone else felt, but never her sisters? If she'd known that Angel felt this way, maybe she could have done something different, behaved differently, somehow prevented all of this.

Matthew's voice interrupted Angel's stream of vitriol, as he called out, "Angel, stop this. You're hurting and you don't know what you're doing. I know you don't mean what you're saying, and you'll regret it later."

Demon turned her head, looking up to see Angel's snarl as she redirected her anger and hatred onto Matthew.



"How dare you try to tell me what to do? You're not my Captain anymore. You should have been mine! I saw you first, and my bitch of a sister stole you from me! But even after you married her, you couldn't keep your hands to yourself, could you? You lusted after me, and you enjoyed fucking me, whenever you and your beloved *Deborah* had a fight. Poor Matthew, lost and lonely, sneaking into his sister-in-law's bed to satisfy his lust. You know something, *Captain?* You're not half the lover Lucas Buck was. *There* was a man who knew how to fuck a woman. You're a poor pathetic shadow of your ancestor, Matthew Gideon."

Matthew tried to speak again, but Angel raised the volume of her shriek to the point where it was painful, and Demon covered her ears, not wanting to hear the spiteful words that fell from

Angel's lips. But there was no escape from the malice as Angel went on.

"You never wanted me to be with Lucas, did you? You were jealous and you knew that he made you look pathetic and small. So you forced me to leave him, sending me off to Mars, where I nearly starved to death. That would have made you happy, wouldn't it? But I survived, so when you found me, you had me arrested, and nearly succeeded in getting me mind-wiped for a crime I didn't commit. I guess you thought that way you could have the body you lusted for without the inconvenience of the person who inhabited it. Such a wonderful brother-in-law. So kind and considerate. Can't stay faithful to his wife, and can't satisfy her sister."

Matthew's anger at the unjust accusations burst out of him as he yelled, "That's not fair, Angel, and you know it! I'd made a promise and I had to keep it. As soon as I was released from that promise, I did everything I could to save you. Damn it, we even broke you out of jail!"

But Angel wasn't listening to anger any more than she was listening to reason. With a wave of her hand she silenced Matthew, knocking him off his feet. Then she continued howling out her Shadow shriek incessantly as she hovered above them. Demon dropped to her knees, pulling her husband into her arms, making sure he was unharmed. To her relief, she found that he was merely winded. So no one else heard Matthew's words except Demon, as he whispered, "I'm sorry, Angel. You'll never know how sorry I am for the way I treated you."

Demon felt his wave of guilt and sorrow as he looked up at the figure floating above them. She felt the deep unhappiness Angel's words had created in Matthew, and she knew that much of his sorrow came from believing Angel was right. Matthew was racked with guilt and pain over how he had behaved toward Angel, and he only remembered the bad things he'd done, never the good.

Angel had turned her attention to Ilas and Lily, and was now screaming at her other sisters, allowing Demon a moment with her husband, sending him a wave of love as she rested her head on his shoulder, his shirt still damp with her earlier tears. Matthew held her tightly, and Demon blocked out the sound of Angel's words, just focusing on trying to heal her husband's pain, as he whispered, "I love you. I *do* love you. You know that, don't you? I may have loved Angel, too, but I've always loved you."

Demon looked up and tried to force a smile to her face as she whispered back, "I can't help knowing it. I'm an empath, remember? And I love you, too."

Burying her head in Matthew's shoulder, Demon blocked out everything but the warmth of his arms, and the feel of his love.

John listened with great sadness as Angel ranted on about how badly everyone had treated her. The problem was that there was a kernel of truth in everything she said. Maybe her sisters *had* all been wrapped up in their own happiness with their partners. Maybe they *had* to some extent ignored Angel's loneliness and pain during the years she had spent on the Excalibur, but they had done what little they could to help their troubled sister.

The Captain of the Excalibur blocked the sound of Angel's words, but couldn't block the waves of pain that emanated from the figure hanging in the air above them. Whatever pain Angel was inflicting on those around her was nothing to what she was feeling. John had never felt pain and grief like it. To distract himself, John looked around at the others. Dureena was

breathing on her own again, although she was still unconscious, with Ilas and Max sitting either side of her, cradling her bruised and battered body. Dureena had fought Galen valiantly but recklessly, and she needed urgent medical attention.

While Angel ranted about all she had done for her family while she had lived on the Excalibur, John sent a thought to his husband and lover. *[[Luke, can you leave Jack with Sarah? Dureena's badly hurt. She needs more help than we can give her.]]*

Luke's response was immediate. *[[Give me a couple of minutes. There's not much more I can do here, anyway.]]*

The mental connection broke before John could query Luke's meaning. He could only hope that it didn't mean what he feared, although Angel's anger and grief made it clear that even if Jack Gideon still lived, it must be pretty hopeless. John took a moment to mourn for the man who was his best friend's double. He knew that Jack Gideon had suffered terrible losses in his own universe, and they had all been happy for him and for Angel, when they had finally come together, giving each other the love they both needed so desperately.

But now it looked as if that happiness was over, and only grief and pain remained. Angel was emitting waves of mental agony that John wasn't able to completely block. He felt her pain, experienced it with her, in a way only a telepath could. It hurt John horribly, and he wished he could think of some way to help Angel, but he didn't know how.

Angel's voice raged on from the sky above John. "None of you ever cared! I helped you all, helped free John from the Joneses, helped Dureena have her baby, helped save Vya from the thing that possessed him, helped save the Excalibur again and again. I even helped Matt's friend Marriot, and then saved Matt on Avalon, and what for? What did any of you care about the way I felt? About my loneliness? None of you cared. You were all too wrapped up in your own lives and happiness to care about my misery."

John knew that Angel was being unfair. They had all cared, but there had been little they could do to help. They had all tried to ease Angel's loneliness, including her in their activities, trying to make her feel part of their families, but all the time they had known it wasn't really enough. Angel had been searching for her happy ever after, going from man to man, from bed to bed, searching for the one thing no one seemed able to give her. And when she seemed finally to have found it with Michael, it had been snatched away from her.

Memories of Michael's funeral swept over John. Angel had been overwhelmed, walking behind the coffin, supported by Matthew and Demon, who had walked either side of her, holding her up. That day, they had all dressed in black, except for John, who had worn his dress uniform. The same dress uniform he had worn to marry Angel to Jack just two days before. And now it seemed she had lost Jack, just as she had lost Michael. It was no wonder she was almost mad with grief.

John sighed, looking up at the raging figure in the sky, holding Lily tightly to his side, wondering how they could calm Angel. How could they bring her back from this rage and grief? How would all this end?

Luke ran down the ramp of Alwyn's ship, pulling on the shirt Sarah had thrown to him as he

left. He knew terrible things had been happening outside the ship while he had battled inside to save Jack Gideon's life. John had made contact intermittently, sending to him telepathically, giving what details he could of the battle as it raged.

So Luke knew that Galen was dead, and Angel was raging out of control, but there was nothing he could do about that now. His only focus was Dureena and saving her life. He'd done everything he could for Jack, and left him in Sarah's capable care. Luke only wished it was enough, but he knew it wasn't. Jack needed a miracle if he were to survive.

Rushing to Dureena's side, Luke blocked out Angel's ranting, and focused on the injured Zanderi. Scanning her with the instruments he'd borrowed from Sarah, Luke could see that Dureena was badly hurt. There were multiple internal injuries, and unless she was treated rapidly, she would bleed to death.

Luke said a silent prayer of thanks that he'd studied up on Zanderi physiology when Dureena had given birth on the Excalibur. He also gave thanks that Sarah kept a very comprehensively equipped Medbay on board Alwyn's ship. It meant that not only did Luke know the right combination of drugs to stop Dureena's hemorrhaging, but he'd been able to grab the supplies he needed as he left.

Pressing the injector to Dureena's neck, Luke looked up into Max and Ilas' anxious faces and smiled. "She'll be OK. We need to get her back to the castle infirmary, and get her some regenerator therapy, but she should be fine."

The doctor crossed mental fingers as he spoke, telling himself that what he said was true. But he also knew that Dureena wasn't as young as she used to be, and her aging had impaired her recuperative powers. While the Zanderi thief should pull through, she would probably never recover her full strength and health.

As Luke scanned Dureena again, watching her vitals gradually improving, the shrieking overhead started to annoy him. He understood Angel's anger and grief but it wasn't helping. He listened as her sisters tried to reason with her, tried to talk her down, listened as Matt tried and failed again to pacify the raging witch.

With a sigh, Luke put his scanner into his pocket, and pushed himself to his feet. It was time to try and talk some sense into Angel, before it was too late.

Turning to face the figure who still hovered in the air above them all, raining down vitriol and malice on her family, Luke called out, "Angel! Enough!"

Luke shuddered as Angel turned her black eyes on him. If looks could kill he should have dropped dead on the spot, and the doctor had an uncomfortable feeling that right now, one of Angel's looks probably *could* kill, if she chose.

Finding a new target for her fury, Angel screeched out, "Don't you start, Luke Raven! You're as bad as the rest of them. You may be a doctor but you make me sick! I'm sick of you, and sick of being taken for granted. I'm sick of losing everything that I love. I'm sick of my sisters, sick of their families, sick of everything. You're supposed to be a doctor, aren't you? Well cure me of this sickness if you can!"

Luke shook his head sadly. He kept his voice quiet as he replied, "I'm sorry, Angel, only you

can cure that sickness. To be cured, you have to believe me, believe all of us, when we tell you we love you."

Angel laughed in his face, but Luke was sure the laughter sounded a little more human, if utterly humorless, as she ranted, "Love? How dare you talk to me about love? Don't you know that's not allowed for me? Everything I love is taken away from me. Nobody who loves me lives, and that just proves that none of you really love me, or you'd be dead too, just like Michael and Jack."

Black tears rolled from Angel's eyes as she spoke, staining her cheeks. Luke's heart went out to her. He'd never seen anyone in such pain before, and it offended him deeply. Everything Luke was, everything he'd ever learned, had always been dedicated to easing pain. Now he faced someone he loved deeply, someone he'd always felt privileged to call his friend, and he didn't know how to heal her, to take her pain away.

But there was one thing she had wrong. One thing Angel might still be able to do that would save them all and most of all, herself. Luke raised his voice and stared defiantly up at the avenging Angel hanging in the air above him.

"Jack isn't dead. At least not yet."

The shriek of pain that followed Luke's words forced him to his knees, and drove his hands to cover his ears. He'd never heard anything like that sound before, and never wished to again. Through the pain in his head, Luke forced himself to carry on.

"But Jack *will* die if you carry on like this. Sarah and I have done everything we can, but it's not enough. We can keep him alive for a few hours, but he needs more than we can do for him. He needs the life-force that only you and your sisters can give him."

The silence that followed Luke's words was almost painful. Angel looked at him, her head tilted to one side, her face twisted in puzzlement, as her body descended slowly toward the ground. When she spoke again, her voice sounded more human, less twisted and evil somehow.

"Not dead? But he wasn't breathing. He died. I saw him die."

Luke pushed himself back to his feet. He sensed the others gathering behind him, and gave them a quick warning glance over his shoulder. He needed them to stay quiet now. He had Angel's attention, and he didn't want anything to distract her.

Turning back, Luke smiled and held out his hand, "He stopped breathing, but Sarah and I got him started again. He's alive, Angel, and only you can keep him alive. But to do that, you have to join with your sisters. Come back to us, Angel. Help us save Jack's life."

Angel's feet touched the ground, and her expression grew more confused. Her voice sounded even more normal, more human as she said, "I don't think I can heal anyone, Luke. I'm all darkness now. I can only kill. I can't cure."

Luke wanted to cheer. That was genuine regret he'd heard in Angel's tones. He was bringing her back. It would just take a little more. He shook his head and smiled.

"That's not true, Angel. You're a healer at heart. You always have been. When you worked

with me in Medbay, all the crew preferred to be treated by you. You had a kind smile, and a healing hand. Everyone knew it except you. You never saw how much the crew loved you, Angel. Just like your family loves you. Like I love you. No matter what happens and no matter what you do, that will never change. I love you, Angel. We all love you."

More tears flowed from Angel's eyes, but this time they were clear, washing the black stains from her cheeks. Luke watched as the black drained from Angel's eyes, and flowed back into her hair. He held out his hand again, encouraging her.

"Come with me, Angel. Jack needs us. Jack needs *you*."

Angel slowly reached out and took Luke's hand. He squeezed it gently, then slowly pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly. The feel of her soft, warm body against his reminded Luke of the one night they had spent together, so many years before. The night when Lily had sent him to Angel, to help her in her loneliness.

Kissing Angel's forehead gently, Luke said, "It's time to come back to us, Angel. Time to come back to us all, to all the family who love you."

Angel buried her head in his shoulder and Luke barely heard her whisper, "How can they still love me, Luke? I've said some awful things."

Luke laughed softly, turning the raven haired witch to face the rest of her family. Demon and Matt stood hand in hand, watching warily, but their faces showed love and concern, not anger. Lily stood at John's side, her arm around his waist, and she too smiled lovingly at her sister. Ilas and Max were still sitting on the ground by Dureena's side, but they also looked up and smiled.

Before anyone else could speak, Luke remembered the words he'd spoken to Angel after their single night of love, and he whispered them again as he hugged her tightly in his arms. "We're friends, and that will never change."

Stepping back, Luke watched as Demon, Matt, Lily and John all rushed forward, taking Angel into their arms and holding her, telling her over and over how much they loved her. That was what she needed to hear, what she needed to bring her back from the brink of madness.

A movement to one side attracted Luke's attention, and he saw Alwyn pushing himself up into a sitting position. He went over to the Technomage, and ran the scanner over him as Alwyn shook his head and looked around, a puzzled expression on his face.



Having reassured himself that there was nothing seriously wrong with the Mage, Luke smiled as Alwyn looked up and asked, "Did I miss something? I could have sworn that Galen and his ship were here a minute ago. What happened?"

Luke laughed. "Angel took care of everything. And now we all need to go take care of Jack."

Helping Alwyn to his feet, Luke watched as Ilas and Max lifted Dureena carefully between them.

Angel broke away from Demon and Lily, coming forward to say, "Let me help."

Using her psychokinetic powers, Angel lifted the still unconscious thief, sending her body smoothly and gently into the ship, with Max and Ilas accompanying her, close by her sides. Luke stepped forward, putting his arm around Angel's shoulder, steering her into the ship as he said, "See? You're a natural healer."

Angel looked up and smiled at him anxiously. All the black was now gone from her eyes, and the white from her hair, except for single streak, about a centimeter wide, that ran back from her forehead. The white streak stood out startlingly against the raven black of Angel's hair.

Luke reached up and touched it. "It looks as if you'll have something to remember today by." Angel looked puzzled, unaware of the mark her fury had left on her head. Luke shook his head. "Never mind. Come on, we have a Gideon to save. Again."

Pushing Angel gently forward, Luke watched as she walked up the ramp. Demon joined her, putting her arm around her younger sister and kissing the white streak in her hair. All was forgiven and the sisters were friends again. Luke wondered, however, if the things that had been said could ever be truly forgotten. Memories of this day were likely to haunt them all for years to come.

As Luke followed them up the ramp into Alwyn's ship, John and Lily joined him. Lily's arm snaked around his waist and she hugged him tightly, as John's voice sounded in his head.

[[I think we all know who the real healer is around here. That was incredible, Luke. You did something that no one else could have done. You're incredible.]]

Luke blushed and reached out with his free hand to touch first John's, then Lily's face. If he was incredible, which he doubted, it was their love that made him so.

Angel walked slowly up the ramp, wanting to hurry to Jack's side, but her legs felt weak, making her unable to run. As she walked, her mind raced at a speed her feet couldn't match. What if she couldn't do what Luke said she could? What if she and her sisters couldn't merge into the life-giving force they once had been? Had that ability been linked to the Vorlon Demon carried inside her? Now the Vorlon slept, would they still have the healing power? And if they failed would Angel lose herself again, drowning in grief and rage? Angel didn't want to go back to that place. Luke had brought her back from the darkness, and she never wanted to there again.

All these thoughts flew through Angel's mind, somehow slowing her steps against her will as she walked into the ship. She also wondered how she could ever truly heal the rift she had created between her and her sisters. She remembered all too well the terrible things she had said, and what made them truly awful was that there had been a nugget of truth in every venomous slander. While her fury and grief had twisted and exaggerated her feelings, Angel knew deep down that she had only verbalized some of the resentment she had felt over the years.

Now she felt the weight of Demon's arm around her shoulders and wondered if things could ever be the same between them. Could Demon ever really forgive and forget? And if she could,

would Matt?

She dismissed all these worries and concerns as they reached the door to the small Medbay Alwyn maintained on his ship. There were only two beds inside, both now occupied. Ilas and Max stood on either side of the bed in which Dureena lay, still unconscious, while Sarah stooped over the other bed.

Angel took tight hold of her fears and anger as she saw Jack lying, pale and still, unresponsive to whatever Sarah was doing. Moving to her husband's side, Angel gasped as she saw how the sheets covering him fell around his body. On his right side, Jack's leg was missing from mid-thigh. The sheet lay flat against the bed.

A small whimper of distress escaped Angel's mouth and attracted Sarah's attention. She looked up and tried to smile as she saw the group gathered outside the Medbay. Beckoning them in, she held her hand out to Angel, saying, "It's OK. We had to remove his lower leg, but it will grow back in time. We have the drugs on board to stimulate the replacement, but Jack needs strength for that. Strength he doesn't have right now. Luke tells me that you and your sisters can help him." Looking over Angel's shoulder to her sisters, Sarah asked, "Can you?"

Angel felt Demon and Lily move to her sides, while the others hung back, giving them room to move into the tiny room. Without needing to say a word, the three sisters moved into position. Demon stopped at the foot of Jack's bed and held her arms out. Angel moved to the left and Lily to the right, then linked hands with Demon.

Looking across at the other bed, Demon said softly, "Ilas, we understand if you can't join us."

Ilas looked up, and Angel saw that her red, cat's eyes were full of fear and anxiety. She knew those feelings all too well and hurried to add her reassurances to Demon's. "It's OK, Ilas. We've done this before with just the three of us. Stay with Dureena."

Angel again suppressed her fears that this might not work. When they had last joined in this way, the Vorlon inside Demon had been feeding them its power. What if they needed that power to give Jack the life-force he needed? Angel was convinced that her own dark energies would be useless in healing, and she feared to draw on them anyway, dreading that they would overwhelm her again.

Ilas forced a smile to her face. "It will be easier with four of us, but can I ask a favor? When Jack is safe, can we give Dureena a little help, too? I know she's not dying but..." Ilas choked on her words, and tears rolled down her golden cheeks. She struggled to bring her voice back under control then went on, "But she could do with some help."

Lily dropped Demon's hand and flung herself at her youngest sister, pulling her into a hug so tight that Angel wondered how Ilas could breathe. Demon's voice was tight with her own emotion as she reassured Ilas and Max, who stood watching, silent but with his anxiety and fears for Dureena evident in his expression.

Ilas and Lily rejoined their sisters, Lily taking her place again at Jack's right side, while Ilas moved to his head. The four of them raised their hands and touched.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, then Angel felt a warm tingling sensation in her fingers, where she was touching Demon and Ilas. Closing her eyes, Angel focused on

establishing a mental link with her sisters.

And they were there, in her mind, not in words but in feelings.

Demon's calmness and control was there, disguising the deep well of love and emotion inside her, like a thin layer of ice covering a deep, rolling ocean. Lily's fiery passion was there too, fueling her nurturing, giving nature. She was earth mother, loving and giving, always unpredictable, but solid as a rock. And there was Ilas, almost insubstantial, constantly changing in everything but her love for her family and friends. She was the breeze of spring and the gales of autumn, always moving and shifting, but always there.

Angel pulled her sisters closer in her mind, warming them with her fire, feeling Demon's ice melt, Ilas' cool breeze grow warm, and Lily's solid ground soften and bloom. They blended together, and Angel felt their power running through her.

Now her fingers burned with the energies her sisters were giving her. She drew deep on their life-force, pulling it into her heart and soul, healing her own hurts, but in doing so, building the healing power, accelerating it, warming it, feeding it with her own love.

Angel felt Demon and Ilas release her hands, and she opened her eyes. She knew what she had to do. Reaching out, Angel laid her left hand on Jack's heart, and her right on his forehead. She heard Luke's words echoing in her head.

"You had a kind smile, and a healing hand."

Suddenly, she knew he was right. This was how she could use her power safely. This was how she could lighten the darkness. She could use her sisters' signatures and energies, blending them together with her own power, turning something dark into something light. From chaos, she could create order.

This was her special power, unique to Angel. She was no longer a creature of the Shadows, created for chaos. Nor was she a creature of the Vorlons, bred for order and the rule of law. Now she was both, merging the power of chaos with the control of order, using that power to heal, not to destroy.

Angel released the life-force she held within her, allowing it to flow through her fingers into Jack's heart and soul.

With her right hand, she felt his mind, circling uneasily in sleep, unsure, fearful of what was happening to him, knowing that something was terribly wrong but not sure what. The life-force flowed into Jack and soothed his fears, calming his restless mind, moving him from fearful unconsciousness into restful sleep.

With Angel's left hand she felt Jack's heart. The beat had been fast and uneven when she had first touched him. As she let the life energy flow out of her, she felt the rhythm slow and steady. The beat became stronger and more certain with every moment that passed.

Standing silently at Jack's side, Angel watched the color flow back into his face as his life-force was strengthened and replenished. After a few moments, when she felt him sleeping peacefully, his energies restored to a level where Angel knew he would recover and flourish, Angel lifted her hands.

Jack wasn't the only person who needed her help. She still had some of her sisters' energies left within her and she still had her own powers on which to draw. It was time to help Dureena. Much as she longed to stay at Jack's side, to watch him strengthen and heal, she was needed elsewhere.

Angel turned to see that her sisters had moved to stand by their partners. They watched her with smiles full of pride and love. They sensed she had mastered her inner darkness, and although it would be a life-long battle for her to keep that darkness under control, Angel *could* win that battle every day for the rest of her life.

Moving across to where the Zanderi thief lay, Angel laid her hands on Dureena. The life-force flowed through her fingers again, and the raven haired witch gave out the last of her sisters' energies. Through her touch, she healed Dureena's wounds, but she also sensed the age and weariness that went much deeper. Angel was tempted to keep giving, to push more life-force through her connection with the aging thief, but she sensed this would be wrong.

Dureena was approaching the end of her natural life-span. Much as she loved her family, the little thief was becoming weary, and would soon give up her hold on life. While Angel could give her more energy, she couldn't cure the underlying fatigue that pervaded Dureena. It would soon be time for the Zanderi to move on.

While Angel had no idea what might await them all beyond death, her experiences with Michael had convinced her that there was something more. It was not her place to delay a natural progression to that other place.

Once Dureena breathed more easily, and slumbered peacefully, Angel lifted her hands and smiled sadly at Max and Ilas. She couldn't tell them that the time they had left with Dureena would be short, but she could reassure them. "She'll heal more quickly now."

Looking at the couple while her body still tingled with the aftermath of her sharing with her sisters, Angel saw something she'd never noticed before. Max and Ilas were also aging. The linguist was well into his sixties now, and while that was still young by human standards, Angel knew that many who had been born and grown up on Mars tended to have shorter lives, perhaps as a result of the low gravity. Max's time could be as limited as Dureena's.

Angel shifted her gaze to Ilas and a wave of sadness swept through her. Ilas, too, was growing old. In her natural form as she was now, with her dark lavender hair, her red eyes and the scar standing out on her golden cheek, the signs of aging were much more obvious. Streaks of grey marked Ilas' hair and lines gathered at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

In human years Ilas was still young, no more than about twenty-five, but her species aged much faster than humans, at least twice as fast. Even so, it had never occurred to Angel that Ilas wouldn't be with them for many years to come, but looking at her now, with eyes focused by her healing powers, Angel could see that Ilas had no more life left to her than her partners.

A part of Angel grieved for the losses they would soon suffer. It would be hard to lose Ilas, Max and Dureena, and she could only hope that they would live long enough for Ilori to grow up. Another part of Angel was almost relieved that none of the three were likely to long outlive the others. They would never have to suffer years of loneliness, grief and quiet desperation, as Angel had after Michael's death.

Returning to the side of Jack's bed, Angel lifted his hand and squeezed it tightly. What mattered most to her now was that her husband should recover enough for them to share their life together. In the background she could hear Matt talking to Alwyn, agreeing that they would all go back to the castle in the ship and make arrangements for people from the castle to come up and collect the fly-bikes.

Angel blocked it all out. All that mattered now was Jack.

11th July 2280

Jack struggled against the bonds of sleep that seemed unwilling to loose him. There was a reason he knew he should wake, but he couldn't quite remember what it was. Everything was blurred and confused in his mind, but of one thing he was sure; he had nearly died again. This had happened more than once before in his eventful life, and the last time, he had longed to give up, to let go, to leave the pain and misery of his life behind.



But this time was different. This time he had something to live for: a name that ran through his heart, his mind and his soul.

Angelique.

He whispered the name, but no sound emerged from his dry throat and mouth. Jack tried to lick his lips, wanted to moisten them so he could call out the name again. Somehow he felt if he could say the name out loud, everything would make sense and everything would be better.

The touch of something cold and hard against his lips startled him further into wakefulness, then the drops of cool, pure moisture falling into his mouth made him swallow greedily, trying to suck down more water from what he now realized was a glass touching his lips.

A soft chuckle was followed by a familiar voice saying, "Steady. Sarah said you'd be thirsty, but she also said not to let you drink too much."

A few more drops fell into Jack's parched mouth, moistening his lips and tongue just enough for him to say out loud the name he'd been struggling so hard to speak.

"Angelique."

There was another soft chuckle, and the voice that sounded so oddly familiar said, "She's right here. She wouldn't go back to your rooms. Can't you feel her head on your shoulder?"

Jack forced his eyes open at last, and turned to where he did indeed feel a weight lying against him. A head of raven hair rested on his left shoulder, and a soft, warm body lay the length of his left side. The bed was narrow, but somehow Angelique had managed to mold herself against him, and she now slept with her head on Jack's shoulder and her left hand on his

heart.

Smiling with relief, Jack kissed the top of Angelique's head gently, then turned to look up at the source of the familiar voice. His own face looked back down at him, eyes narrowed, watching him carefully. Matt.

Jack's memories began to unscramble themselves as he looked around and saw he was in a strange room. It was small and austere, with just a single narrow bed, a chair and a bedside cabinet. The equipment that was pushed back against the wall made the room's purpose unmistakable. This was some kind of medical facility, and the plastered walls made it clear that he was back in the castle.

Jack lay still for a moment, pulling his thoughts together, trying to make sense of things. He remembered the wedding, the time he and Angelique had spent together afterwards, the picnic and...Looking up at Matt's now smiling face, Jack sighed with relief. "I assume..." his mouth dried out again, and he reached for the glass Matt was still holding.

Matt gave it to him, but steadied Jack's hand as he sipped at the water, then took it back when Jack's head fell back against the pillow, setting the glass aside on the cabinet.

Jack started again. "I assume everyone is OK? You wouldn't be standing here, smiling, if they weren't."

Matt nodded, then pulled up the chair and sat at Jack's right side. In a few short words, Matt summarized what had happened up at the Carillon Gap. When he'd finished, Jack gave a sad sigh.

"So Galen is dead in this universe, too." He looked up at his doppelganger and saw his own sorrow reflected in Matt's eyes. Galen had been a friend to them both. In Jack's universe, he had died a hero, trying to save his friends. Better that, than his end in this place, as an enemy and a monster.

Jack looked up and frowned, asking, "What happened to him here, to make him like that? When did he go down such a dark road?"

Matt shook his head, saying sadly, "I hate to say it, but it was after he met the sisters. They were a force created by the Vorlons to challenge the Shadows. The Technomages were..." Matt bit off the words. Jack wondered what Matt had been about to say, but pushed his curiosity aside as Matt started again. "I can't tell you what the Mages were; I made a promise. But the sisters represent everything the Mages hated about the Vorlons. Galen's hatred of them was visceral, so deeply entrenched in his being that he couldn't overcome it. On a rational level, he knew they weren't evil, that they were victims, pawns of the Vorlons. But instinctively, he hated them and felt he had to destroy them. That hatred destroyed our friendship and in the end, it destroyed him."

Jack watched his double carefully, realizing that Matt was telling him things he would never speak of to anyone else. His sorrow at the loss of his old friend was something that none of his family would ever really understand. Only Jack could truly share his sense of loss.

Reaching out, Jack grasped Matt's arm, and squeezed it, saying nothing.

After a few moments of silence, Jack turned to look at Angelique's sleeping form, noticing the white streak in her hair for the first time. He lifted his hand to touch it, puzzled, then looked over at Matt questioningly.

Matt looked at where Jack's hand was gently stroking Angelique's hair and sighed. "That's the visible reminder of the burden Angel carries now. None of us can ever forget the power she holds within her, and she'll be reminded of it every time she looks in the mirror. But that power can be used for good, Jack. She used it to heal you and Dureena. She'll just need some help controlling it. Can you do that for her?"

Jack smiled and turned his head to kiss Angelique's hair again, whispering, "Always. And forever." Nothing was ever going to take him from her side ever again. Not in this lifetime or in any to come.

A twinge of pain from Jack's right leg made him wince. He hadn't had chance to think about his own injuries as yet. He remembered the searing agony when Galen's fireball had hit his leg, but after that it was all a blank. Now a pale echo of that pain made his leg throb. Shifting carefully to avoid disturbing Angelique, Jack stretched out his right hand to rub his sore knee. And found nothing.

A wave of panic swept through him, and Matt grabbed his hand, pulling it away from the empty space where Jack's leg should have been. Matt held Jack's hand tightly, refusing to let go as Jack struggled with him.

"Let me go! I want to know what happened! What have you done to me?" Jack could hear a note of hysteria in his voice and struggled to bring himself under control. He would *not* panic.

Matt held on, saying quietly, "Galen's fireball nearly took your leg off. Sarah and Luke had to amputate." The panic started to fight back against Jack's control, but he forced himself to listen as Matt went on, "But don't worry. Sarah has the drugs you'll need to grow it back. It will take a few months, but you'll be fine."

Jack stared at his doppelganger in confusion, feeling his panic trembling on the brink of release. His laughter was almost hysterical. "Grow it back? What the hell does that mean? I'm not a salamander, how the hell am I supposed to grow it back?" Anger, panic and confusion warred within Jack, and it took all his self-control to contain them. Angelique still lay sleeping at his side, and he didn't want to wake her, only to see him in this state. Taking deep, calming breaths, Jack forced himself to listen to Matt's response.

"Didn't you find the drug planet?" Jack's confusion must have been obvious, as Matt grinned, let go of Jack's hand, leaned back in his chair and asked, "Remember Knuckles Malone?"

Jack wondered where Matt was going with this, but nodded, continuing to gulp down calming drafts of air. "How could I forget him? He left me in a brothel on...what the hell was the name of that place?"

Matt laughed, "Damned if I can remember. Well, the next time I heard from Knuckles must have been after our universes had gone their separate ways."

Matt went on to tell how Knuckles had contacted him again, with a story about a planet where the vegetation could be turned into miraculous drugs. As Matt described the events that

followed, including his arrest for pimping, Jack started to laugh. At first it was croaky and uneven, but at least the hysteria had receded.

As Matt's tale unfolded, his description of his and John's arrest and detention in jail on Vega, including John giving the false name of 'John Sheridan', eased Jack's fears and relaxed him. By the time Matt finished with, "And that's why John always says 'turnips' to me, whenever he thinks I'm doing something particularly stupid," Jack was laughing almost uncontrollably.

The sound and vibration had the not unexpected affect of waking Angelique. Jack's wife roused, sitting up, rubbing her eyes, then glaring at Matt and Jack.

"What's so funny? I was having a lovely dream and you woke me up."

Jack reached up and pulled Angelique down into a passionate kiss. As he tasted the ever-present flavor of honey that lingered on Angelique's lips, he told himself that it didn't matter if he was a cripple. All that mattered was that he still had the woman he adored, and that she still loved him.

When he finally released Angelique's lips, she pulled back a little, and gazed down at him, her crystal blue eyes flashing with emotion. Jack wasn't sure if it was anger, passion or amusement, and he found he didn't care. All that mattered was that she looked at him like that, and no one else.

"Don't you *ever* do anything that stupid again!" She thumped his shoulder gently, and Jack saw the pain and fear in her face as she went on, "I thought I'd lost you, and I never, ever want to feel that way again, you hear me?"

Jack smiled and pulled her down into his arms, running his hands over her body, kissing her, whispering over and over that he would never leave her. He'd almost forgotten Matt's presence until a clearing of a throat brought him back to the here and now.

"I think I'd better leave you two now, if you're going to...well, it's time I got on with some other things anyway. And I should tell Sarah you're awake, so if you're going to do anything, make it quick. Angel, he's still weak. Be gentle." With a grin and a wink, Matt left the room, pulling the door gently closed behind him.

Angelique laid herself along Jack's left side again, snuggling against him. Jack held her tightly, and said quietly, "Matt's insane if he thinks I'm capable of doing anything more strenuous than a feeble hug right now." Angelique chuckled softly and snuggled closer as Jack went on. "He told me that the leg will grow back, but it will take a few months."

Jack felt Angelique's head nod in agreement, and she said, "That's what Sarah and Luke told me, too. Maybe we'd better stay here until then. I'm not ready to pilot the ship by myself yet, and even with Harry on board, I don't think I can manage all the trading and cargo shifting on my own. It's a shame though. I know you had a couple of really good deals lined up."

Angelique sighed at the loss of opportunity his injury would cause, and Jack squeezed her gently against him. Then a thought occurred to him and he grinned. "I may have a better idea. Let me think about it."

Feeling Angelique's head nodding again, Jack sighed softly. It was going to take a while until he

recovered from his injury, and he hadn't planned on spending his honeymoon flat on his back. That thought made him smile again, and he chuckled softly as he turned and kissed the top of his wife's head again. "You do realize that with only one leg, I'm not going to be able to get proper leverage when we make love. So while I'm growing a new one, you're going to have to go on top."

Angelique grinned up at him. "Works for me. I've always been a bit of a cowgirl at heart, and I like nothing better than riding a well hung stallion."

Jack roared with laughter and held her close against his side again, wondering how he could possibly have got so lucky. As sleep stared to claim him again, his last coherent thought was that convalescence was going to be fun.

Gideon sat on the edge of the bed and scrubbed his face with his hands. He felt bone weary after the events of the last few days, and he yearned for a long, undisturbed sleep to recover his energies. Maybe tomorrow morning the children would occupy themselves quietly elsewhere, and he could sleep late and have breakfast in bed. Maybe.

He had just kicked off his boots and pulled his socks off, when the sound of the bathroom door opening made Gideon look up and smile as his wife entered their bedroom. Her hair was tied up, and damp curls fell around her neck, showing that she had just emerged from the shower. Gideon sighed in mild regret at not having got back soon enough to join her there.

The black, silk robe Deborah wore clung to her body, outlining every curve, as she made her way silently across the room, and climbed onto the bed behind Gideon. He closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh of pleasure as without saying a word she started to massage his shoulders and back, releasing the tension that had built in his muscles during the day. Gideon sent a silent prayer of thanks to Booji for giving him a wife who knew what he needed without asking.

After a few moments, Deborah tugged his t-shirt free of his pants, and pulled it over his head, then gently nudged him until he was lying on his belly on the bed, his arms under his head on the pillow. Then she moved until she sat straddled across his hips, and continued with the massage.

Gideon had almost dozed off when he felt his wife's lips touch his shoulder, and he smiled as she gave his butt a gentle slap. That was his cue to roll over and gather her into his arms, reveling in the feeling of her soft, warm body lying alongside him, her silky hair caressing his bare chest as she laid her head on his shoulder.

They lay in silence for a few moments until Gideon roused himself enough to ask, "Are the kids OK? They were all asleep when I looked in on them." He had checked the children's rooms before returning to his own, wanting to be sure that they were all safe. He'd kissed Mattie on the forehead before he'd left, and he now smiled at the memory of how angelic his daughter had looked in sleep. Pity she didn't stay that way when she woke.

Deborah's head moved on his shoulder as she nodded and said, "Marcus was a bit upset by all the strong emotions flying around when we got back yesterday, but he's calmed down now. He went to see Jack and Angel this afternoon, and although they were both sleeping, it reassured

him that they were OK." She paused for a moment, then asked, "Did you get everything done?"

Gideon sighed, knowing this wasn't an easy subject for his wife. "Yes. Alwyn took me and John up to the Gap, and John called for a couple of shuttles to bring lifting gear down from the Excalibur. We found where Galen's ship had gone down, and cleared the area. What was left of Galen's body was underneath."



The memory of the Technomage's crushed and torn remains made Gideon shudder, and he felt his wife hug him more closely in response.

After leaving Jack and Angel that morning, Gideon had gone to Alwyn and John, asking for their assistance. He'd felt he had one last debt to pay, one more thing to do, before he could leave Eriadne in peace. Alwyn had nodded seriously, and described the funeral rites normally used by Technomages. They had then gone together to recover Galen's body from the Carillon Gap.

They had found that Galen's ship had been dropped directly on top of the Mage, and they'd needed the Excalibur's help to clear the area, but after a couple of hours the job was done. They had gathered the Mage's remains and placed them in a body bag, then built a funeral pyre at the top of the cliff.

Alwyn and Gideon had both said a few words, remembering the times when Galen had been their friend. Then they had lit the pyre, and stood silently as the fire burned. Gideon had watched the flames rise, remembering his friend, wishing events could have gone differently, but knowing that sometimes destiny could not be diverted. In this universe, this was the way it had been meant to be. So be it.

The flames had risen as the sun had fallen, the fire flaring with different colors, as the Mage's implants had burned. By the time the fire had burned down to glowing embers, Eriadne's usual spectacular sunset had faded from the sky and darkness had fallen. John, Alwyn and Gideon had returned to the castle in somber silence.

Gideon held his wife close to his side and sighed. "I wish it could have been different for him. I wish Galen could have known the happiness you've brought me. I wish he could have experienced something like your love. Maybe then he wouldn't have been so eager to destroy."

Deborah sighed. "I'm not sure he was capable of love, Matthew. He was so filled with hate and anger; there didn't seem any room for love."

Gideon shook his head, knowing that Deborah was wrong. He had watched as Galen had scattered Isabelle's ashes at the Well of Forever. Galen had been capable of great love. He had loved Isabelle with a passion that had driven him to betray his friends, to travel to the ends of the universe to fulfill his last promise to her.

Still holding Deborah tightly, he told her about that time, and about Galen's love for Isabelle. Gideon knew this was difficult for his wife to understand. All she had ever experienced from Galen was hatred, and it was hard not to hate back, when you were the target of such loathing. But he wanted Deborah to know that Galen hadn't always been evil. He was just a man who had made bad choices.

Eventually, Gideon sighed again and said, "I sometimes wonder if things would have gone differently if Angel could have returned Galen's feelings."

Deborah's long silence was followed by an answering sigh. "Matthew, that was never going to happen. By the time she met Galen, she had already seen you, and met Lucas Buck. At that time, there was no room in her heart or mind for anyone else." After a short pause, Gideon felt Deborah kiss his shoulder again, her lips moving into a smile as she said, "Anyway, Angel and I have very similar taste in men, and one thing we both like is a full head of hair."

Gideon laughed as Deborah reached up and ran her fingers through his hair. He grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers. Then her words reminded him of a question he'd been meaning to ask.

"Talking of you and Angel having the same taste in men, maybe it's time you told me about this David character."

Deborah went very still, her body tensing. Gideon frowned and looked down at her, then pushed her gently onto her back, rolling onto his side and propping his head on his hand, so he could watch her. His wife's face had taken on the frozen expression she wore when she was hiding her feelings, and for a moment Gideon wondered whether she would refuse to answer his question.

Then Deborah closed her eyes and sighed, her face relaxing as she said, "Maybe you're right. After nearly eleven years of marriage, it's time I took that skeleton out of the closet and watched it crumble in the light of day."

Gideon listened as she described her first serious relationship with a man. As she spoke, he found himself becoming angry, and fought to control his emotions, not wanting to distract Deborah from her story.

When she'd finished, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently on the forehead, saying, "So, your first lover was an insensitive bastard, who told you that you were frigid and then went and screwed your sister. Right?"

Deborah nodded and Gideon grunted, "Then it's a damned good job he's been dead for over two hundred years, or I might go looking for him with a PPG that I'd insert somewhere painful before I pulled the trigger."

Deborah chuckled, then said, "Fortunately, my second lover was a vast improvement. He was kind and gentle, considerate and careful to give me pleasure. He taught me how wonderful making love could be."

Gideon bit his lip, trying to quell the surge of jealousy provoked by the thought of another man making love to his wife. "Does this paragon have a name?" He knew he should leave it alone, but somehow he couldn't.

Deborah looked up at him and smiled. "Yes. His name is Matthew Gideon."

Gideon blinked several times as realization overwhelmed him. "One? You only had one lover before me?"

Deborah nodded again, and gave him an embarrassed little smile. "I didn't want you to know how inexperienced I was, so I never told you. But I guess it doesn't really matter now, does it?"

Gideon thought about it, then rolled back onto his side, pushing Deborah onto her back, and reaching down to loosen the belt of her gown. When she lay naked beside him, he looked the length of her beautiful body and smiled. Nothing really mattered, except that this woman was his. A wave of love swept through him, and he looked up to meet Deborah's golden eyes, seeing the passion there, and knowing that no other man had ever, or would ever see her look at him that way. She was totally and completely his, as he was totally and completely hers.

A mischievous smile crossed his lips as he said, "That David guy. What a loser."

Gideon leaned down and touched his lips to hers, letting all his love for her flow into that kiss, knowing she would feel it and understand.

12th July 2280

Jack sat up in bed, waiting impatiently. He'd been in the infirmary for over a day now and he wanted out. Despite the severity of his injuries, the combination of regenerator therapy, and the drugs Sarah had given him made him feel full of life and energy. He was ready to pick up the threads of his life again, so he wanted the crutch that the village blacksmith was making up for him, he wanted to get back to the rooms he shared with Angelique, but most of all he wanted to see the visitor he was waiting for.

Patience had never been a Gideon trait. Even after years of working in Earthforce, when waiting for something to happen seemed to be around 90% of the job, Jack had never gotten good at it. He didn't even have a pack of cards to shuffle, to while away the moments.

He'd reached the point of wondering if he could hop down to the courtyard by himself, even though he was only wearing the pair of shorts Angelique had brought him, before she'd gone back to their rooms to nap. Having decided that the other occupants of the castle would just have to put up with the sight of his white legs...leg, Jack threw back the covers and prepared to swing himself out of the bed.

It was probably fortunate for Jack and for everyone else in the castle that at precisely that moment there was a discrete knock on the door, and a golden and black spotted face appeared in the opening.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" G'Tan's broad face was full of curiosity as he moved into the room and closed the door behind him. If he'd had eyebrows, they would have been raised at the sight of Jack preparing to leave his bed.

Jack leaned back and pulled the covers over himself again, grinning at the big Narn and waving him to sit next to the bed. "I guess you could still call me that, although these days I'm Captain

of a much smaller ship. And that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

G'Tan looked at him quizzically, and Jack knew his request for a visit must have come as a surprise to the Marine. They didn't really know each other well, having only exchanged a few words in the period leading up to the wedding and at the reception, but in some ways, Jack felt as if they'd known each other for years.

Angelique had told him many stories about the time she had spent on board the Excalibur, including tales of the weapons training G'Tan had given the sisters, and a story about how the big Narn's sewing skills had averted a large crisis over a small bear. Angel's fondness for the Marine had been evident, and Jack had always had a soft spot for the Narn people. He liked their single mindedness, reckless bravery, determination, and their tendency to dive into the middle of a fight, regardless of the consequences.

G'Tan had of course known Jack's doppelganger, Matt Gideon, for many years, so there was a sense of familiarity between the two, which Jack now wished to enhance and exploit.

Taking a deep breath, Jack pointed at the space in his bed where his right leg should have been. "This is going to slow me down for a while."

G'Tan nodded, but said nothing, so Jack went on, "If Angelique and I are going to carry on trading, I'm going to need some help on board the Angel's Rest."

The Narn nodded again and said, "I believe Harry is going to join you to provide additional support."

Jack agreed. "Yes, but Harry isn't exactly the sharpest pencil in the box. He has a good heart, a strong back and he's willing, but he needs supervising, and I'm not going to be able to do that close up for a while. I need someone who can manage Harry, someone who can organize the cargo, be my eyes and ears outside the ship, and most of all, keep things secure so we don't get robbed blind every time we go planet-side.

"Now if I could find someone smart, someone who had experience in running a team, with a strong background in security, and that person happened to be approaching retirement, and wasn't exactly enthusiastic about leading a quiet life, then that would solve all my problems. Would you by any chance know where I might be able to find someone who fits that description?"

As Jack had spoken, G'Tan had started to smile, and the grin had gotten wider as Jack continued. When Jack finished, the big Narn nodded. "I think I may know someone who might be suitable. But he wouldn't work alone. He has a partner who would want to come on board with him."

Jack pursed his lips, pretending to consider, but he already knew the answer. After a few seconds he said, "I don't see that as a problem. There are several cabins on board, some single and some double, as we sometimes carry passengers."

G'Tan's grin broadened even further. "Then I think we can come to an arrangement, Captain. Now let's talk terms."

Jack laughed. Somehow he knew that this would be the toughest deal he was ever likely to

negotiate, but he also knew it would be the most rewarding.

14th July 2280

Demon looked at her sisters and smiled mischievously. "Do you think they really left us alone to say goodbye, or do you think they're worried we'll bring the roof down this time?"

Lily and Ilas both laughed, and even Angel managed a slightly pained smile at her sister's question. The four of them stood alone in the great dining room of the castle, all the other members of their family having left after breakfast. It was indeed time for the sisters to say goodbye, and none of them knew when they would be together again.

Jack had left with Harry and G'Tan, telling Angel he would start making his way down to the ship, grumbling about how many stairs there were inside the Angel's Rest. No'Kar had laughed, telling the grumpy Captain that she'd carry him up the steps if he needed help, then the female Narn Marine had bid a fond farewell to the sisters. One by one, all the others had hugged Angel and said their goodbyes, as the Angel's Rest would be the first ship to leave Eriadne.

Soon after, the shuttles would arrive to take Lily and Ilas, along with their children and partners, back to the Excalibur. The week's shore leave was over, and it was time for the ISA flagship to resume her mission. Demon, Matthew and the children would be traveling back to Earth on Alwyn's ship, a prospect Demon wasn't much looking forward to. The ship might have ample space for Alwyn, Sarah and Jaysen, but adding two more adults and two active children would make it feel very cramped on board. And if Ishtar got irritated by the over-crowding, then it was quite possible that Matthew would get his ears singed again, which would be bad news for everyone.

Dismissing her wandering thoughts, Demon brought her mind back to the present. She lifted her arms and held her hands out to her sisters, beckoning them toward her. Ilas and Lily stepped forward without hesitation and took their older sister's hands, but Angel hung back.

Demon smiled again as she watched her younger sister biting her lip nervously, and looking anxiously at the others. "Do you think this is wise?"

The tall blonde almost laughed aloud at her sister's apprehensive words. It was so unlike Angel to be the cautious one. Demon smiled down at the raven haired witch and said softly, "It's not just wise, Angel, it's necessary."

Taking a deep breath, Demon explained. "You're the leader of the merge now, Angel, and you have to work out how to control it. You can only learn that by doing it. Come, let me show you." This was something Demon had thought long and hard about since the events at the Carillon Gap. She had confided her fears in Matthew, telling him how she worried whether Angel would be able to control her new powers.

In the darkness of the night, Matthew had held her tightly, kissing her forehead, and asking, "Is it something you can help her with? You used to control the power of the merge. Can you teach Angel how you did it?"

Matthew had been right, of course. Demon had been forced to learn control from an early age, and in later life, her challenge had been to relax that control. Now it was Angel's time to learn.



Ilas and Lily held out their hands, smiling at the raven haired witch, and reassuring her. Angel stepped forward hesitantly, then slowly lifted her hands until she touched her sisters. In that moment, Demon felt the rush of power that surged through them, and she fought to keep herself from being subsumed within the merge.

Fighting to maintain her individuality, she sent to her sisters. *[[Angel, you have the*

power, but you need more than raw power if you are to lead. You have to take what we can give you. From me, you must take discipline and control. You must learn to control your emotions, or they will lead you down a path you should not follow.]]

Demon closed her eyes and relaxed, allowing all her discipline and control to flow through her fingers into Ilas' and Lily's hands. She heard Lily's voice echoing in her mind as the little redhead said, *[[From me, you must take grounding and nurturing. You must learn to love yourself as much as you love others. Only love can save you from the darkness.]]*

Ilas' voice chimed in, soft and sultry, almost ethereal in its lightness. *[[And from me, Angel, you must take flexibility and strength. You must learn to adapt to the present and future, never allowing yourself to be locked onto a single path, for in rigidity lies despair.]]*

The powers flowed through Lily and Ilas and on into Angel's hands, and at last Demon let herself go, letting herself merge with Lily and Ilas. With a single voice, they spoke to the fourth sister, their new leader. *[[Take what we have to give and use it, Angel. Take our strengths and combine them with your own. But most of all, take our love and be happy.]]*

Tears flowed down Angel's face as she took her sisters' gifts, accepting their love and their gifts, and blending them all inside her. Now she had the strength to control her own powers, now she had the caring and nurturing to use that power constructively, and the flexibility to bend and adapt her powers to suit the needs of the moment.

Angel's mind soared above the constraints of her body, lifted by the merge out into the galaxy. Just as when she had merged with her sisters on arrival, she felt she could see into every corner of the universe, touch every star and feel every being. Now she could find Lucas and Gabriel if she wanted to, but she no longer needed to find them. That part of her life was over, and could not be changed. Gabriel belonged to Lucas, and that could not be changed either.

The part of her that was mother grieved for her loss, but the part that was strong and flexible

told her that nothing was certain. While she knew her body could no longer safely carry children, there were always alternatives, and the future wasn't fixed. All that mattered now was that she and Jack would be together, and they would be happy. Happy ever after.

Slowly, carefully, Angel examined her links with her sisters, seeing something in their minds that she'd never been aware of before. A potential that had never been fulfilled. This must have been the final step the Vorlons had intended them to take, but the sisters' rebellion had prevented it. With a shudder, Angel gave silent thanks for that. If the Vorlons had tried to force this potential, it would have been excruciatingly painful for the sisters. Angel wondered whether Demon had sensed it, but had never had the desire or power to exploit it, fearing the pain it would cause. But Angel had the power. This was something she could do easily and painlessly.

For a moment, the raven haired witch hesitated. Should she ask her sisters first? But time was passing and this opportunity might never occur again. So Angel reached out and touched each of her sisters' minds, activating a sense that had lain dormant in each of them. Then she withdrew her hands from theirs and opened her eyes.

Demon stood before her, hands still outstretched, holding on to Lily and Ilas, while her eyes remained closed.

Angel sent a thought. *[[Demon? Wake up, Demon. Come back to me.]]*

Demon's mouth curved into a smile and her thoughts came back to Angel. *[[I was having a lovely dream. I just can't quite remember what it was about.]]*

The tall blonde opened her eyes, and dropped her arms, releasing her sisters from her grasp. Then she looked at Angel and smiled again. *[[Did it work? Did you take what we had to give?]]*

Angel almost laughed. Demon wasn't even aware that she hadn't spoken out loud. *[[Yes, darling, I took what you all gave me, but I gave you all something in return. Try sending to Ilas and Lily.]]*

Demon's eyes widened as she realized that she was no longer touching her younger sister, but could still hear her thoughts.

[[How? How can this happen? We don't have the power anymore. We can't link without touching.]]

Demon looked so stunned, Angel couldn't hold back her laughter. And when she saw Lily and Ilas looking equally amazed, she lost control completely.

Thoughts flew back and forth, but Angel was laughing too much to hear the words, until Lily grabbed her arm and shook her. "Angel, if you don't tell us what's going on, I swear I'll pinch you black and blue!"

"Ouch!" Angel protested as Lily gave a small demonstration of what might be to come.

Working hard to suppress her giggles, Angel explained. *[[When we were in the merge I saw something in our minds, something that we weren't using properly. So I made the change that*

was needed, and now we can always link with each other, wherever we might be. We don't have to worry about space or time, we can always be together, whenever we like.]]

When the other three had finally calmed down enough to accept what Angel was saying, there was a long silence. Then Demon's distinctive thought pattern resounded in Angel's head.
[[*That's all very well, but we really ought to set up a schedule. I don't want you calling at an inconvenient moment.]]*

The sly grin on Demon's face took the sting from her words, and Angel retorted, [[*Inconvenient moment? I guess that would be when you and Matt are making out like bunnies, would it?]]] A fleeting memory of Jack's reaction to her bunny outfit nearly made Angel crack up again, but she controlled herself as Demon replied.*

[[*Hello Miss Pot! So do you want us calling you when Jack has got you settled in the saddle for a good, hard ride? I know how much you love to polish his saddle horn!]]*

The sisters all started laughing, and it took several minutes before order was restored. Then Lily flung herself forward, grabbing her sisters and pulling them into a tight embrace.

[[*This is a wonderful gift, Angel. I can't thank you enough.]]*

Angel glowed with the love and thanks her sisters sent her, but finally, reluctantly, pulled away from them.

[[*I have to go. I just want to find Marcus, so I can say goodbye to Baby, then I have to go down to the ship. Please don't come down with me, as you'll only make me cry. Give me one last hug and let me go.]]*

Angel's sisters surrounded her with their arms and their love and granted her wish.

Jack sat on the bridge of his ship, staring out of the front window. This was all taking longer than he'd planned, and they were in danger of being late for their rendezvous.

He glanced over at G'Tan, who sat in the pilot's seat, checking over the ship's controls, making sure--for the fifth time--that everything was ready for take off. Jack had taken the Narn through the peculiarities of the Angel's Rest's flight systems earlier, causing the ex-Marine Sergeant to raise a non-existent eyebrow on more than one occasion. The Angel's Rest was a lot more powerful, and a lot more heavily armed, than she appeared. When Angelique had taken up residence aboard, Jack had quietly upgraded all her armaments and defenses, wanting to take no chances with the most precious cargo in the universe to him.

"She's late." Jack ground the words out through gritted teeth.

G'Tan looked around and grinned. "And whose fault is that? You know what she'll be doing now, don't you? She won't leave until she's been through every room in the castle, and then she'll...here she comes."

The Narn pointed out of the front window of the shuttle, and they both watched the figure flying down the hill toward them. Jack was a little startled when he realized that Angelique was literally flying. Her raven hair streamed out behind her in the wind created by the speed of her

passage. Her feet were a couple of meters off the ground, and she leaned forward in her haste to get down to the ship.

Jack decided he was lucky she hadn't just materialized on the bridge; he'd been told she could do that, but he hoped she wouldn't do it too often. It would be rather disconcerting to have your wife appearing out of thin air whenever she felt like it.

The sound of feet thundering up the steps to the bridge made Jack aware that Angelique had abandoned flight for a more conventional form of motion. [Probably because the ceilings are too low,] he thought.

Angelique burst onto the bridge, and Jack turned his head to look at her, keeping his body still in his chair. He couldn't help thinking how beautiful she looked, her crystal blue eyes flashing, her cheeks flushed with exertion, her freckles standing out against the white skin of her nose, her lips full, her mouth slightly open as she panted for breath. Shaking his head, Jack forced his thoughts toward cold showers and ice cubes, trying to quell his arousal before it became noticeable. He didn't want to disturb...

"I can't find him! Jack, he's gone and I can't find him anywhere!" Angelique sounded distraught and for a moment Jack felt a pang of guilt. He shouldn't be enjoying her beauty when she was so distressed.

"Who's gone?" Jack kept his tone quiet and curious.

"Baby! Marcus said he was with Harry, but I just checked with Harry and he said he left him with Marcus, and I think he must have wandered off, and Jack, what if he wandered outside the castle, and one of the avians got him?" Tears started to roll down Angel's face as she gasped, "He's only a little dog, he was the runt of the litter and he never grew very big, so one of the big predators might have got him and...and..."

Jack was unable to rise to comfort Angelique, but he turned his seat around so he was facing her, smiling and holding out his arms. "Stop panicking. Baby is fine."

Angelique started to yell, "You don't know..." when she looked more closely at Jack, and in particular at the small dog that lay sleeping across his legs.

The shriek of joy Angelique let loose left Jack and G'Tan shaking their heads and poking at their ears, checking to see if their eardrums were still intact.

A rather startled Baby woke abruptly when he was snatched from Jack's lap, and cuddled in Angelique's arms. The little dog yawned mightily, then started to lick the salty tears from his mistress's cheeks.

Once she calmed a little, Angelique looked up at Jack with narrowed eyes, from where she knelt on the floor at his feet, cuddling Baby protectively.

"What's going on here? Why is Baby here? He's supposed to be with Marcus."

Jack smiled and leaned forward, reaching out to touch Angelique's beautiful face. "I never did find time to get you a wedding present. So will this do instead? I know a spaceship isn't the best place for a dog, but as you say, Baby is only a little dog. He won't take up much room,

and as long as you let him have a good run around the cargo hold every day, and *you* get to clean up his litter tray, I guess..."

Whatever else Jack may have wanted to stay was lost when Angelique started to kiss him passionately. Baby wriggled out from between the passionate couple, and dropped to the floor, looking from Jack and Angelique, across to G'Tan, then back again, before starting to bark, wag his tail, and run around in circles.

Jack finally emerged from Angelique's kiss feeling dizzy from lack of oxygen, but happier than he could remember feeling in a very long time.

Pulling Angelique to sit across his thighs, Jack gestured at G'Tan to lift off. Baby settled himself leaning against Jack's leg, and they all watched as the landscape slid by and the blue sky darkened above them.

The Angel's Rest lifted herself out of the atmosphere, and Jack found himself grinning as he considered everything he now had. He had a ship, a cargo, a crew, a wife and a dog. He was missing a leg, but only temporarily. Soon he would be whole and happy, free and independent, leading a life that would never be dull, with a woman by his side who he adored and who adored him.

It didn't get much better than that.

Maybe this is what they meant in fairytales when they said:

And they lived happy ever after.



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