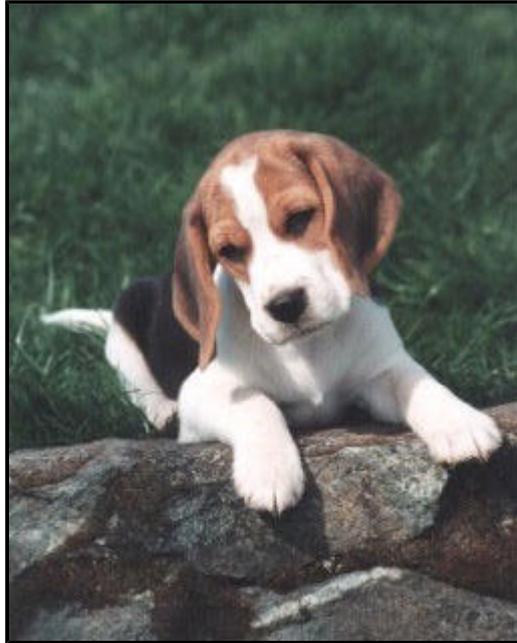


The Witches of Eriadne: Something Wicked this Way Comes - Part 4: Regrets

by The Space Witches



Could you resist this puppy?

Chapter 2

March 2279

Earth

Gideon woke abruptly, sensing that something wasn't right. The light filtering in around the edges of the heavy curtains indicated that it was still early, and despite the dimness of the curtained room, it only took a moment for him to realize what was wrong. He was alone. The bed to next to him, where his wife's warm, naked body should have been, was empty.

He was sure that if one of the children had roused, he would have woken with her, so she must have left the bed quietly, careful not to disturb him. Moving his hand across the bed, Gideon couldn't feel any warmth where Deborah had been lying, so he knew she must have left a while before.

Throwing back the covers, Gideon climbed out of bed and moved over to the windows, pulling back the curtains to look out onto the lawns behind the house. It was going to be a bright, sunny spring day, although the sun was barely up, and a heavy frost still glittered on the

grass. The smooth whiteness was thick enough to look as if a sprinkling of snow had fallen during the night, and Gideon's eyes were immediately drawn to the tracks in the frost, which led across the lawn to the summerhouse, perched on the edge of the low cliff, overlooking the sea.

Gideon could see a whiff of smoke coming from the chimney of the summerhouse, showing that the wood burning stove inside had been lit. They had installed the stove for warmth on cool summer evenings, but it would also help fend off the cold of a brisk spring morning. Gideon now knew exactly where his wife was, and he had a pretty good idea of why she had gone there.

Hurriedly throwing on his clothes, Gideon reached for his wrist-link and snapped it in place, giving terse instructions to the house computer to call him if either of the children woke. Then he pulled on a pair of boots, and left the bedroom as quietly as he could. The last thing he wanted at that moment was Mattie waking up and yelling for her father. Now five years old, Gideon's daughter was still much more demanding than her easy-going older brother had ever been.

As he ran lightly down the staircase, Gideon cursed quietly to himself. This trip back to Earth was supposed to have been a long vacation, allowing them to spend time with their son during his Easter break from school, and to catch up with old friends like Sarah and Alwyn, who were due to arrive on a visit the next day. The news that had awaited them at their home had cast a shadow of sorrow over the whole trip.

When they had arrived at the house three days before, they had found a message from Susan Ivanova, asking them to call her. They had been unable to get an answer on her personal line and when Gideon had finally fought his way through the layers of Earthforce bureaucracy and got through to her in her office the night before, he had known at once that something was seriously wrong. Susan's face on the viewscreen was lined with grief and exhaustion, and for the first time, he could see strands of grey standing out against her lustrous brown hair.

Susan's words still echoed in his mind. "Marcus' White Star is missing. He was on a mission, and he's four weeks overdue. I think we've lost him."

Gideon and Deborah had both tried to persuade Susan that Marcus might just be held up somehow, the ship's engines being repaired, but General Ivanova would accept no comfort. She had said quietly, "We both knew the risks of him carrying on with his duties for the Rangers. We've had some happy years together. I just have to accept that he's gone, and get on with my life."

Thinking back on that conversation as he crossed the lawn, Gideon shook his head, cursing Ivanova's pessimistic Russian fatalism. He knew Susan was a strong woman, one of the strongest he'd ever met, but he wondered how she would find the strength to go on. She had lost Marcus once before, and thrown herself into her work, cutting herself off from everything but her job. When the witches had resurrected Marcus, they had also brought Ivanova back to life. Marcus had given Susan back the joy she had lost, given her a reason to live, other than her career. For her to lose that again... Gideon wondered how she would survive, and suspected that she would close herself off again, throwing herself into her work as she had done before, abandoning her personal life. Marcus' loss was therefore doubly tragic.

Shivering a little in the frosty dawn, Gideon turned his thoughts nearer to home as he arrived at the glass doors of the summer house. Looking through, he smiled sadly. Deborah's coat was thrown over one end of the deep sofa, while she was curled up at the other end. She wore only her black silk robe, and her face was buried in a cushion, with her hair cascading loosely around her shoulders.

Opening the door, Gideon hurriedly stepped inside into the warm, shutting the door behind him quickly, to keep the cold outside. Deborah looked up as he entered, and he saw at once that she had been crying. He moved to the sofa, sat next to her, then pulled her into his arms, kissing her forehead as she laid her head against his shoulder and wept quietly.

They sat in silence for a while, until Deborah's tears subsided, and she looked up at Gideon, sniffing, and wiping her nose on the back of her hand. Gideon laughed softly, and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. Deborah took it and blew her nose noisily, then snuggled against his side again.

The silence lengthened as Gideon sat looking out over the calm sea, enjoying the warmth of his wife's body pressed against him, the feel of her arms around him, and the weight of her head on his shoulder. Eventually he turned and kissed the top of her head again, asking softly, "Why did you come out here?"

Deborah gave a soft sigh, then said, "I didn't want to disturb you by getting upset in our room, and if I went anywhere else in the house, Marcus would have sensed me. This place is far enough away so he can't pick up on my feelings."

Gideon moved his hand to lift her chin toward him, and kissed her lightly on the lips. "You didn't have to run away to cry. It's OK to be upset about Marcus Cole going missing."

Deborah remained silent, and after a few seconds, realization dawned on Gideon. "This isn't about Marcus, is it?"

Deborah shook her head, but still said nothing, just tucking her head back into Gideon's shoulder. He raised his hand to stroke her blonde curls, whispering, "We'll find her one day. You mustn't give up hope. He can't hide from us forever."

There was no need to name names. They both knew who he was talking about. For two and a half years, Gideon had used every contact he had, had pulled every string he could pull, yet still Angel and Lucas Buck remained in hiding. Gideon knew his wife missed her sister more with every passing day, and her absence was a wound that just wouldn't heal. Deborah rarely spoke of her sorrow, but that didn't make it any less painful for her. Gideon cursed his inability to ease that pain; cursed his failure to find Angel and rescue her.

A wave of guilt swept through him, bringing an instant response from Deborah. Her head came up and she glared at him. "Don't you dare feel guilty! You've done everything you can to find them. You nearly got yourself killed on Eriadne trying to save Angel. You have nothing to feel guilty about!"

Gideon pulled his wife back into his arms, smiling as he kissed her again. "I'll promise not to feel guilty, if you'll promise not to run away when you feel the need to cry. Do we have a deal?"

Deborah looked up at him and gave a sad little chuckle. "Deal. I guess it was pretty stupid to

try and hide from you, wasn't it?"

Gideon grinned down at her. "Yes, it was, but that's OK. I have a weakness for dumb blondes."

Deborah laughed and swatted his arm, then settled at his side again, hugging him tightly. The warmth of her body and the scent of her hair started to have their inevitable effect on Gideon. After a few more moments of contented silence, he slowly slid his hand inside her robe, and started to play with her nipple. It hardened under his fingers at once, and Deborah shifted beside him, sliding her hand down to his jeans, rubbing her fingers over his arousal.

She looked up at him and grinned. "Here? We've never done it here before."

Gideon grinned back at her. "Then it's about time we did."

Regula IV

Lucas paused on the threshold, hesitating before he knocked. He surveyed the dozen red roses he held in his hand. They'd cost him a fortune to get shipped in, and he hoped they would be well received. Angel was invariably in a bad mood these days and constantly picked at whatever he did for her, saying it wasn't good enough in no uncertain terms. Lucas tried to tell himself it was the hormones.

Everything Lucas had attempted to do for Angel, to please her and make her happy, only seemed to piss her off. No matter what he did, or how perfect he thought it, nothing was good enough. His patience and restraint was being tested, and at times Lucas couldn't help but wonder if having an heir was worth all the trouble. A grin spread across his face. [Well, the practice sure was fun.] But now Angel was six months pregnant, she hadn't let him touch her in months, and he couldn't help but wonder if there could have been some easier way to get what he needed.

"Maybe a different mother for my son," Lucas muttered under his breath. Unfortunately that wasn't possible. Angel was the perfect choice for the mother of his heir. He ruthlessly ignored a weak thought that it wasn't the only reason he wanted and needed Angel. Lucas told himself the real reason he'd chosen the raven-haired witch was because her genes, when combined with his, would result in an heir more powerful than anyone could imagine.

Lucas squared his shoulders and told himself to get inside. He was Lucas Buck, and he certainly wasn't scared; he could handle the witch on the other side of the door. Lucas knocked and waited for an answer. A few minutes later the door was wrenched open with such force he was amazed it remained on its hinges. [Here we go again!]

"Oh, it's you," said Angel, giving Lucas an up and down look that made him feel like she'd just discovered Baby's shit on the sole of her shoe and needed to scrape it off quickly.

Forcing a disarming smile, Lucas held out the flowers. "Hello, love. Beautiful flowers for an even more beautiful lady," he said seductively.

Angel took the flowers, looking far from impressed. "Try the smooth talk on your school-teacher whore, Lucas. I'm not in the mood!"

Biting back a retort, Lucas moved forward and attempted to kiss Angel, but she side-stepped him. He reined in his annoyance and continued, "Going to let me in, Angel-face?"

Lucas was surprised when she shrugged and moved back, allowing him to enter. He stepped inside, and while Angel closed the door, he shrugged out of his jacket, quickly hanging it up on the coat rack. As Angel turned around, he grabbed one of her hands and searched her face. It concerned him that she looked so pale, her face drawn and dark rings under her eyes. He let his eyes move from her face, taking in with concern the rest of her body. For someone who was six months pregnant she looked too thin. He was no expert, but she looked only three or four months along to him.

He placed his free hand on her belly and concentrated on the child within. He was pleased that despite the physical state of his mother, the baby was healthy and thriving within Angel's womb.

Angel wrenched her hand from his, forcing his attention back to her face. No surprises; there was fire flashing in her blue eyes. "If you've finished gawking, Lucas, I'll go put these flowers in water."

She pushed past him, leaving Lucas sucking in his breath as he followed her into the kitchen. As she prepared the flowers and arranged them in a vase, Lucas leaned against the wall, watching her. "You look tired," he stated gently.

Pausing in her work, Angel glanced over her shoulder. "You don't say?"

Lucas chewed the inside of his lip a moment before responding, "I'm just concerned, love."

Angel snorted and abandoned her flower arranging to turn to face Lucas, arms folded. "If I look tired it's because this baby keeps me up most nights, kicking the stuffing out of my insides."

"If I could make it easier for you, I would."

"Really? How about you having this baby for me? Then maybe I can eat again without throwing up every damn time. My back will stop hurting, I'll stop having stomach cramps, and my ankles won't be so swollen they hurt and..."

Lucas held up his hand cutting Angel off. "Whoa Nelly, I get the point." He paused and pushed himself away from the wall. When he reached Angel, he cupped her face and said gently, "I know it's not been easy for you, Angel-face. I worry about you. You need to take better care of yourself; rest more,"

Angel shoved Lucas away. "Get away from me. Your aftershave makes me want to vomit!"

The only thing stopping Lucas from losing his temper was the interesting shade of green Angel had turned. "I'm not wearing any. You made it clear before that the smell makes you feel sick," said Lucas softly.

"Well then, it must be that unique, natural musk of yours," said Angel harshly, as she turned to the sink and grabbed a glass from the draining board, filling it with water, which she gulped down quickly.

"Sorry, love there ain't nothing I can do about that. Besides, you've always loved how I smell," stated Lucas, forcing an injured tone to his voice, in the hopes that it would soothe the ill-tempered woman before him. No such luck.

Glancing over her shoulder, Angel gave him a scathing look. "Well, that was before you got me pregnant. Now, everything about you makes me nauseous," she said accusingly.

Lucas' annoyance was growing rapidly. He wanted to tell her she'd agreed to the deal and it was getting old having her whine about it and blame him, but he refrained, even though Angel could test the patience of a saint when she was in this mood. Unluckily for him, she'd been like that virtually all the time since she'd discovered she was pregnant. He told himself again that it was just the hormones and he wasn't allowed to kill her.

Although it was very tempting...

"You don't really mean that, love. You're just a little sensitive at the moment. It will soon be over."

Angel laughed harshly. "Not soon enough. I still have another three months of this hell to go through, and no doubt I'll be throwing up until the very end." She paused for breath before going on, "You try throwing up for six months and see how happy you feel. I swear if I could rip this thing out of me, I would. I'm tired of feeling like shit, thanks to your child!"

"You don't mean that; it's just a baby. I'm sure lots of women go through what you're going through. It'll pass," said Lucas, trying to reason with Angel. What was it with the women who bore his children behaving like this? If he'd been any other man, he'd start taking it personally.

"My sisters never went through the hell I'm going through, Lucas! My God, just leave! You're very presence is making me feel more ill by the minute and if you don't leave now, I swear I'll vomit on you!" yelled Angel.

[Heard that one before!] Lucas could tell there was nothing he could say to reason with her. And again he wondered if getting his heir was worth all this grief. He held up his hands, "Fine, I'll go. Hopefully later you'll be feeling better and then maybe you'll let me convince you to move into the mansion with me, where I can care for you myself."

"You already know my answer to that. I'm fine staying here in my own home and I have Harry to look after me if I need anything. Now just go!" barked Angel.

Lucas contemplated arguing with her, until he noticed the green tinge she'd had moments before had been replaced by deathly white. He hated seeing her like this, his vibrant Angel angry all the time and sick looking--not very attractive traits in a woman. Besides that, he didn't want to push her into such a state that she passed out on him or worse, did vomit on him.

"I'll go, but I'll be back later, Angel-face, just to make sure you're OK. I know you're not well and you're angry with me, but you can't push me away, love. No matter how hard you try," said Lucas. He held Angel's eyes for a moment, then when she looked away, he turned and left.

As Lucas walked back toward town, he had to control the mounting anger inside himself. If

Angel hadn't been pregnant with his child, he'd have turned her over his knee and given her a spanking so severe she'd not have been able to sit for a week. She really was being impossible, even for a hormonally imbalanced pregnant woman. And what was worse, she was really beginning to irk him. He did his best to surprise her with treats and things to entertain and amuse her, but she spurned them all. That really pissed him off--he hated being unappreciated, especially when he was being all noble and nice.

Stopping suddenly, Lucas changed his mind about heading home. He was angry and there was only one way to work it off. Angel didn't want him around these days, but he knew of someone who would, and Claire sure did know how to show appreciation down on her knees.

Whistling softly to himself, Lucas headed for the school. He'd work off his anger and then later, he'd go back and face Angel again. Hopefully she'd be in a better mood by then.

The moment Angel heard the door closing behind Lucas she burst into tears. She turned to the flowers, half arranged in the vase, and picked up one of the roses, gently caressing the soft red petals. Turning with the rose, Angel left the kitchen and moved awkwardly into the living room.

She sat down on the sofa and stared at the rose. "What's wrong with me?" she asked softly. The roses were beautiful, and Lucas had been so kind in bringing them to her and showing his concern for her, but all she could do was be mean to him.

Sighing, Angel knew what was wrong. Everything. She was lonely, frightened and sick all the time. Her behavior toward Lucas was motivated by him being a natural target for all her runaway emotions. The crazy thing was that she found herself feeling guilty about it at the same time. Lucas was being kind and supportive, and she was pushing him away. Why?

She knew the answer to that one, too. While she loved Lucas, and the issue of his kindness towards her aside, she blamed him for most of what she was feeling and going through. She wouldn't be so lonely if she could have her sisters there to support her through what Angel was finding to be a very unnerving and frightening experience--her pregnancy.

Angel's throat tightened as she thought of her sisters. She so desperately wished that Demon, Lily and Ilas could be there, to put their arms around her and to tell her that everything was going to be OK.

Most especially Angel wanted Demon to be there. Demon would be able to still the panic that was nipping at Angel's heels, threatening to send her spiraling out of control. But because of the deal Angel had made with Lucas and because of the threat he was to her family's safety, Angel had to go through this pregnancy alone. That was hard; in fact, damned near impossible. Her sisters had all been pregnant before, Demon and Lily more than once. Angel desperately wanted their advice and knowledge, but instead she had to go it alone, and she was convinced from what she could remember of her sisters' pregnancies, that hers was far from normal.

That thought brought her to the other person she missed and longed to have by her side. Luke, her dear, sweet best friend and doctor, who she knew would be able to help her and make

her feel better, emotionally and physically. But he couldn't be there any more than her sisters. Instead, Angel had to put up with the local doctor, who frankly she didn't like or trust. Lucas had chosen him to be her doctor, and she suspected he knew that something about her pregnancy was abnormal, but he refused to tell her, perhaps because he'd been told not to.

Angel didn't even want to go deeper into that suspicion because she knew it would only lead to Lucas.

If all this wasn't enough, Angel felt alone and isolated on Regula IV. Harry was the only person who spent time with her, apart from Lucas. The rest of the townspeople were polite and friendly enough, but on the whole didn't take to her. Again, she blamed Lucas for that. Just as he'd done in Trinity, he'd instilled trust in some of the people, but mostly fear and hatred in others. Because they viewed Angel as Lucas' woman, the villagers didn't take much of a shine to her, which left her pretty much an outcast and alone. She was also nervous and tense around them, always having to guard her tongue, always fearful that she might make the mistake of calling Lucas by his real name, instead of the name he used on this planet. If it weren't for Baby and Harry's company, and Lucas, life on Regula would be unbearable.

Suddenly, a wave of pain gripped Angel as the baby kicked and caused her stomach to cramp. It took her several moments to recover, as ripples of pain shot out from her belly through to her lower back. Once the pain had subsided Angel fell back against the cushions of the sofa, exhausted. Her pregnancy took so much out of her physically, and being tired and sore didn't help her mood much either. Nor did the pain and discomfort the baby caused help quiet her fears about her unborn child.

Almost from the beginning, Angel had sensed something about the child she carried. She couldn't explain it, and if she did, people would say it was her imagination and just her hormones speaking, but she knew she wasn't imagining things.

Deep down, Angel knew the child she carried was evil. She could feel the darkness inside the unborn life within her. She'd told Lucas she didn't get much sleep these days due to her constant nausea, but that wasn't the only reason. Angel couldn't sleep because she had terrible nightmares. Nightmares she tried her best not to think about or remember, but she did, and what she remembered frightened her.

Angel shuddered and felt guilty. Her unborn child scared her and she hated that feeling. A mother should not fear her own baby. But she did, and if her emotions were out of control, could she be blamed for that?

Angel started to cry again. She desperately wished things could be different. Having the child of the man you loved more than anything was supposed to be a happy time. She knew she was supposed to be feeling warm and happy, embracing her first pregnancy, but all she wanted was for it to be over. She hated feeling that way and she hated treating Lucas the way she did. He was trying so hard to make things easier for her, but she wouldn't let him. Angel wanted her sisters to be there, but they weren't and she missed them more than anything.

The raven haired witch's body was wracked by sobs as she gave into her loneliness, fear, and misery. Nothing about her situation was fair. All she wanted was for things to be better, to be easier and she wanted to be allowed to love Lucas without knowing that he'd never return her feelings. She wanted to have her family with her, without fearing for their lives, she didn't

want to be afraid of the child within her womb and most of all she didn't want to worry about what was going to happen when he was born.

"Miss Angel?"

The soft nasal voice from the doorway startled Angel out of her misery and she looked up to see Harry, with Baby in his arms, watching her with concern. She hadn't even heard him returning from having taken Baby for a walk.

Angel tried to pull herself together, but she didn't have the strength. Instead, the sad concern in Harry's eyes only set her off and she started crying harder, unable to choke the words out past her throat, constricted with tears.

"Oh, Miss Angel," said Harry, as he rushed over to her. Sitting down, he carefully placed Angel's dog between them and gathered Angel into his arms. For a big man he was gentle as he held her, kindly stroking her back as he let her cry against his shoulder. Angel was barely aware of a soft snuffling noise as Baby, clearly aware of his Mistress' distress, snuggled against her, trying in his own way to give her comfort.

"It will be OK, Miss Angel. Please don't cry," said Harry soothingly, as he continued to pat her back.

Angel hiccupped and lifted her head to respond in a choked voice, "No, Harry, it won't." Then she collapsed against his shoulder again and continued to cry.

Harry finished his beer and gestured at the bar tender to bring him another. He and the barman didn't need to speak. Harry was a regular at the inn. He preferred it to the place in the woods the Boss kept for his men. It was quieter in the inn, giving Harry peace and calm so he could think, as thinking was something he needed to concentrate on. Thoughts didn't come quickly or easily to Harry, so he needed quiet to focus himself. Not that he had anything better to do with himself in the evenings, anyway.

He stared into the golden depths of his refilled glass and sighed. It hadn't always been that way. Once he'd had Bubba for company. Bubba hadn't been the most exciting companion in the galaxy, but at least he'd been company. Now all Harry had to occupy his time was to take Baby for walks, do odd jobs for the Boss, think, and worry about Miss Angel.

It was the last that occupied him most these days. He worried about Miss Angel a lot. She looked tired and unhappy, not at all like the pretty, lively lady who had first come to Regula IV. She'd been full of life and energy then, sassing the Boss in a way no one else dared, even though there had been times when she'd cried with loneliness from missing her sisters. That made Harry think back to when he'd first seen Angel on Eriadne, with her sisters and their families.

Harry remembered Angel's sisters, ladies who were as pretty as Angel, but very different. The tall blonde one was married to a man who looked so like the Boss that he was scary, and they had a son who they obviously adored. Then he remembered the little red headed sister, and that brought a soft smile to Harry's face, as he recalled her three children, all very different, but equally loved by their parents. He couldn't help wondering if things would have turned out

differently for him and Bubba if they'd had loving parents.

The smile faded from Harry's face as he remembered his own childhood, spent in various children's homes, with occasional visits to foster parents, none of which had worked out. The only constant in Harry's life had been his younger twin brother, Bubba. Harry remembered when Bubba had begged him to use that nickname, rather than his real name. Bubba had never liked his real name: Orville. Other kids had teased him, and after being called 'Orrible Orville', and 'Orville the Orc' one time too many, Bubba had refused to respond to the name any more, insisting that from then on that everyone should call him Bubba, the name Harry had used when too young to pronounce the word 'brother'.

Harry knew that his own life might have been easier if he hadn't had to care for Bubba, but he didn't mind. Bubba may not have been bright, but he was sweet tempered and kind, if all too easily led astray. Harry had once heard the adults at the children's home commenting that both twins had been damaged by an unusually long and painful birth process, but that Bubba, being the younger, had suffered worse. Maybe that was why their mother hadn't wanted them. It didn't really matter, they'd had each other.

Taking a long pull at his beer, Harry forced it past the lump in his throat, a lump that always lodged there when he thought about his brother. Thinking of the sisters and of Eriadne inevitably made him think about how Bubba had died.

When the time had come to leave the castle, Harry had been unable to find his brother. He'd searched the castle and grounds, eventually making his way into the orchard where he'd stumbled upon Bubba's twisted and broken body. Dropping to his knees, Harry had let out a great shriek of pain as he'd taken his brother in his arms, yelling at him to wake up. The people from the castle and the village had come running when they'd heard his screams, and they had eventually managed to pry Bubba's body away from Harry, convincing him that it was too late; Bubba was dead.

The Brakiri had explained that Bubba had died from poison, after being attacked by one of the horrible birds that lived on Eriadne. It was a dreadful accident. Harry had been forced to accept this, but he'd also heard their muttered comments that those birds had never attacked anyone in the area of the castle before. As the villagers had helped him carry Bubba's body back into the castle, Harry had looked up and seen the Boss looking down from the battlements, a satisfied smile on his face. Ever since, Harry had wondered just how much of an 'accident' Bubba's death had been.

The Boss had been mad with Bubba for attacking the other man, the Captain, who seemed to be related to the Boss in some way. They certainly looked the same, even though they obviously hated each other. Harry didn't really understand why the Boss had been so mad, but he'd hurried Bubba away, worried by the words that had been spat at him.

"Get him out of here. I'll deal with him later."

Had that been a threat? And had the Boss followed through on that threat later, somehow making Bubba's death look like an accident? Harry had never been sure, and he'd tried to push his doubts aside, not wanting to think about them. If he thought about it too much his head hurt, and he started to get angry. Getting angry with the Boss was a bad idea. Very bad. People who got angry with the Boss didn't live very long.

Glancing over the top of his glass at the barman, Harry remembered the previous owner of the inn. He'd gotten mad with the Boss, and he'd had an accident, too. A fatal one. Better to push all those thoughts deep down where he could keep them safe and hidden.

A loud crash from the corner of the inn made Harry swing his head around to look in that direction. He'd hardly been aware that there had been other people in the bar, but now he couldn't ignore the yells of dismay coming from the corner. A small, slim built man was staggering away from an overturned table, trying to grab at a young woman. She was backing away, holding an empty bottle in her hand, threatening the slim man with it as she yelled, "Don't even think about it, you runt! Just because I agreed to have a drink with you, doesn't mean you can do that!"

Harry recognized the girl. She was from the village, in her late teens and going through a rebellious phase, but she wasn't a bad kid. She just thought it was smart to come drinking at the inn, a place her parents had almost certainly told her to stay away from. Now she was finding out why her parents had given that advice. The man she'd been drinking with worked for the Boss at times, coming and going on his errands. He was a foul mouthed drunk and Harry was always sorry to see him come and pleased to see him go.

Abandoning his beer with a sigh of regret, Harry moved across the bar with surprising speed for a man of his size, putting himself between the man and the girl. He faced the small man, keeping his back to the girl, knowing that the man would put a knife in his back without hesitation. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Harry hissed, "Get out of here, Sherry. Be a good girl and stay home at nights in future."

The scared looking teenager nodded and fled with a gasped, "Thanks Harry!" as she ran out into the night.

Her departure allowed Harry to concentrate on the man in front of him. He was staring up at Harry, trying to focus. Drool slid from his mouth as he bumbled, "Whaddy do that for? I was gonna fuck her."

Harry held up his hands, trying to calm the drunken idiot. "She didn't want to be fucked, Al. But I know a place you can go, if that's what you want. Why don't you come with me?"

Al looked up suspiciously, but then gave a sniff and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said, "OK. But it had better be good. I need a good fuck."

Harry nodded, steering the drunk toward the door and acknowledging the barman's murmured thanks as he helped Al out into the street. "I'll take you to the place the Boss keeps for his men. It's good. Don't know why you were drinking in town anyway. The village inn isn't much fun."

Al leaned heavily on Harry as they walked slowly out of the village. "Needed a drink quick when I got here. Needed to clear my head."

Harry laughed softly. "A bottle of whisky isn't much help with that."

Al gave a peculiar little hiccup. Harry wasn't sure if it was a laugh or a sob, but Al went on, "It helps kill the memories, Harry. It helps me forget the things I've done."

The cold night air seemed to be sobering the smaller man, and he started to walk more upright,

leaning less on Harry as they progressed down the dark road toward the Boss' farm.

"What sort of thing?" Harry knew he'd probably regret asking, but he was curious.

Al stopped, turning to look at Harry, his expression hidden by the darkness. His voice was still slurred, but Harry heard him say, "I've killed a lot of people, Harry. Killed them in cold blood. Most of them were bad people who had it coming, and they don't bother me. But one of them wasn't bad. One of them didn't deserve to die..."

His voice trailed off and suddenly the smaller man dashed into the bushes lining the side of the road. Harry could hear the sound of him vomiting there, so he waited patiently for Al to empty his stomach, thinking about what he had said.

Harry may have been slow but he wasn't entirely stupid. He knew the Boss sometimes wanted people dead, and he knew people like Al carried out the Boss' orders. He'd always assumed the Boss had a good reason for why those people should die and it had never occurred to Harry that Al might have a conscience about his killing. It puzzled him, and he found he wanted to know more.

When Al rejoined him, they walked down the road in silence for a while, before Harry finally asked, "You said there was one who didn't deserve it? Which one?"

Al shook his head, seeming reluctant to talk at first, but there was still enough alcohol in his system to loosen his tongue. He seemed to trust Harry, as another of the Boss' men. He probably assumed that Harry was too dumb to understand what he was saying, and would never remember it anyway.

The small man launched into a story about how the Boss had sent him to Earth some years earlier, with instructions to shoot a man, but to make it look like the intended victim had been someone else. The real target had been a bodyguard.

"But why did the Boss want the bodyguard dead? What had he done?" Harry was confused.

Al shook his head. "I wondered that myself for a long time. I got the answer when I came here last year. You know who that bodyguard was married to?"

Harry shook his head, more confused than ever.

Al stopped in the road. They were now outside the village, on the road running past Angel's house. The light from the porch shone out into the road, allowing Harry to see as Al raised his arm and pointed.

"Her."

Harry didn't understand at first. His gaze followed in the direction where Al was pointing, but it took him a few seconds to think it through.

"Miss Angel? The bodyguard was married to Miss Angel?"

Al nodded, and a wave of memory flooded over Harry's mind, carrying him back to Eriadne again, to a moment when the other man who looked like the Boss had tried to persuade Harry

and Bubba to betray the Boss. That man, the Captain, had told them that the Boss had killed Angel's husband, but Harry hadn't believed him. Now he knew it was true.

"But why would that make the Boss want him dead? I don't understand?" Harry almost begged for an explanation.

Al gave a sorrowful little laugh and patted Harry's shoulder. "Don't you see it? He hated the idea of her being married to someone else. He always wanted her for himself, so he had me kill her husband. In cold blood. For no other reason than he was married to the wrong woman. Because that poor bastard loved the woman the Boss wanted for himself."

The two men looked up at the house in silence for a few minutes, then turned together and carried on walking down the road. Neither said anything, but words pounded through Harry's brain, over and over.

[That stinks. That really, really stinks.]

A few paces further down the road, Harry stopped abruptly, his mind made up. He grabbed Al's arm and started dragging him back toward Angel's house. Al protested, but he couldn't resist the larger man's pull.

"You gotta tell her. She ought to know."

Al laughed hysterically. "You're mad! Or even dumber than I thought. The Boss will kill us both if we do that!"

Harry shook his head, determined now. "Doesn't matter. You want to sleep easy at night? You want to forget that you killed a man for nothing more than loving the wrong woman? Then you gotta do this. You gotta confess."

Angel stood there, listening to Al as he re-told his story. With every painful second that passed as Al told her the truth about Michael's death, burning anger, pain and guilt, the likes of which she'd never experienced before in her life, grew inside her. Like acid it coursed through her veins.

Her conscience, her voice of reason, tried weakly to convince her that what Al was telling her was a horrible, cruel lie; that it couldn't possibly be true. If it were true then all the hopes she'd had for the existence of the man she loved inside Lucas were figments of her imagination: just ghosts. But Angel saw the look in the man's eyes, heard the fear in his voice. He was terrified of what he was saying to her, fearing what Lucas would do to him for telling Angel the truth. No man would lie about another person they feared as much as Al obviously feared Lucas.

The feelings inside Angel began to turn to rage. Al was telling her that Lucas had her husband killed and he was telling her that he, Al, had pulled the trigger. The man sitting before her had taken Michael from her life forever. Something inside Angel snapped and like a volcano, she exploded.

With an anguished scream Angel attacked Al, cutting his words of apology off mid-sentence as she exerted her power on him.

Al was flung upwards off the chair and went sailing through the air, his startled scream cut off as he hit the large mirror on the wall behind him with a sickening thud, shards of glass falling and shattering on the ground. Angel didn't let him fall; all her anger, hatred, pain and guilt were focused on the man, keeping him pinned against the wall, his legs flailing desperately as he begged to be released.

At this point, Angel saw a flash from the corner of her eye, as Baby yelped in fear, jumped out of his bed and ran, disappearing upstairs. But she didn't let that distract her for long as she focused harder on Al, a twisted smile spreading across her lips as she watched his eyes widen and his hands fly up to his throat. He gasped for breath as Angel tightened her invisible hands, slowly and painfully choking the life out of him.

"Miss Angel, stop! You're killing him!"

Angel heard Harry's voice, and without diverting her eyes from Al, who was now beginning to turn red in the face, she shook her head. "He killed Michael. He deserves to die," she hissed, using her power to tighten the invisible hands around Al's throat until his eyes began to bulge.

"Yes, he does, and he'll pay for what he has done. But you aren't a bad person, Miss Angel. You don't kill people. Please stop," said Harry, casting a concerned look from Angel to Al, who was now turning a deathly blue.

"Maybe I am a bad person, Harry," said Angel, slowly moving closer to Al, cocking her head to one side as she continued to hold him against the wall. "Michael died because of me. The least I can do is avenge his death by killing his murderers," she said. Even to herself, her voice sounded odd--emotionless and cold.

"No, you didn't make Michael die. The Boss did that. Please stop, Miss Angel. You don't want to do this!" said Harry desperately, trying to move between Angel and Al.

"Get away, Harry! I have to do this!" growled Angel.

"Miss Angel, please! You... you don't look right! Think about the baby!" Harry didn't usually raise his voice around Angel, but this time he yelled and something in his voice got through to her. She let out a gasp and stepped back from Al, who suddenly fell to the floor, gasping for breath and clutching his throat, mewling in pain. Angel glanced at him, and saw that his neck was already beginning to show bruising.

Shaking, Angel stepped back, running her hand over her belly. The baby kicked suddenly and she groaned in pain. Harry rushed to her side saying gently, "Come, sit."

Harry gently guided her to the sofa. For the moment, Al was forgotten as he lay semi-conscious on the floor.

Angel inhaled deeply, trying to still the waves of pain emanating from her belly. Thoughts and feelings flashed through her. The rage she'd felt. The power she'd used against Al. She shuddered. While in recent times her power seemed to have gotten much stronger, she'd never before been able to do anything like what she'd just done to Al. Yes, some of that had come from what she'd just learned about Michael, but the rage and the power seemed to have come from somewhere other than herself. The baby kicked again and she knew: the child she carried was Lucas' son. He carried that bastard's genes, Lucas' power, and probably some of the

Rage.

That thought turned Angel cold, and she felt like throwing up. Taking deep breaths, she willed the bile back. She didn't want to believe the baby could possibly be that powerful already or that he could be so bad. No, it had to have been her anger that had strengthened her power, causing her to almost kill a man. While she firmly believed Al deserved to pay for what he'd done, Harry had been right, she wasn't a killer.

Harry's concerned voice cut in, "Are you all right, Miss Angel?"

Angel had to bite back a sarcastic remark. Harry was just concerned and he didn't deserve the acid of her tongue. She patted his hand. "Not really," she said looking over at Al.

Harry's eyes followed hers, "What are you going to do now?"

It was a good question. Angel still wanted Al to pay, and possibly somewhere down the line she could make sure he did. But as she sat there, watching the pathetic man, mewling and babbling softly on the floor, she realized that the person who should pay above all others wasn't the man who had pulled the trigger. The man who deserved to be punished was the man who had put the gun in Al's hand and given him a target to kill.

Maybe it was shock, but Angel began to feel a calmness that shouldn't have been possible given the circumstances. But she did feel calm, and more rational than she had in a long time. A plan appeared in her mind, crystallizing in an instant. Shifting, she asked Harry to help her up.

When she was standing she walked over to Al, who shied away and tried to bury himself against the wall. "Please don't hurt me no more! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, please forgive me!"

"Shut up!" snapped Angel. She didn't want to hear his apology or give him forgiveness. She turned to Harry, "I want you to get this piece of scum away from me. Make him vanish."

Harry's eyes widened. "You want me to kill him?" he asked. Lucas had asked him to kill before and Angel could tell from the look in his eyes that he was desperate for Angel not to say yes. And she didn't.

Shaking her head, Angel patted his arm reassuringly. "No, Harry. I would never ask you to do something I can't do myself. No, I just want you to get him off Regula, immediately. I can't run the risk of Lucas finding out about his having been here. I don't want Lucas to find out what I know, until I want him to know," explained Angel calmly.

Harry watched her for a moment. He wasn't the brightest crayon in the box most of the time, but sometimes, just sometimes, he could be smarter than he looked. "OK, I'll get him off the planet," Harry moved forward then stopped, giving Angel a quizzical look. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to think, Harry. I'm going to think of a way to make Lucas pay for what he took away from me," replied Angel.

Harry nodded in understanding then marched over to Al and roughly brought the terrified man to his feet. Then without another word, Harry dragged the hapless Al out of the house, leaving Angel standing in the middle of the room, wondering just what she was going to do

about the truth she had learned.

The answer didn't come. Pain came crashing in around her, as she thought about what Lucas had done to Michael and to her. For a moment, her need to decide what to do about Lucas was replaced by the loss she felt all over again. A sob caught in Angel's throat and just for a little while she gave into the pain and guilt she felt and collapsed on the sofa, crying her heart out.

Once the storm of emotions had flowed through her, and Angel had given into the pain and guilt she felt over Michael's death, she straightened on the sofa and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She knew if Demon and Lily were there, they would tell her not to blame herself for Michael's death; that it was Lucas alone who was responsible for killing her husband.

Angel sighed. She wished it were that simple, that easy to step away from the responsibility, but she couldn't. In her heart, she knew Michael had been killed because of her. Lucas believed he owned her, body and soul. That had been the deal. Angel knew why Lucas had had Michael killed: to get rid of the obstacle in his way. Anything that was a threat to Lucas getting what he wanted was always destroyed, but never in her worst nightmare had Angel believed that Lucas would have had her husband murdered.

Anger began to well up at the unfairness and cruelty of it all. Michael had never done anything to harm another living soul. He'd spent most of his adult life protecting people, saving them. Including her. All he had done was to love her the way she'd always dreamed of being loved, and it had cost him his life.

Letting out a ragged sigh, Angel tried to not let herself drown in despair, but her guilt was overwhelming. [I'm cursed] she thought sadly. She wasn't meant for love. She was either hurt by it or she destroyed it.

"Michael, I'm so sorry. I never deserved you. I should have tried harder to push you away. Maybe if I had you'd still be alive. Not only did I rob you of a good long life, but because of me, Will, your beautiful son, lost a father. I'm so sorry," whispered Angel to the heavens, hoping somehow that Michael would hear her and forgive her.

As she sat there, a gentle breeze blew in from the open window and a feeling of love wrapped itself around her. Just for a moment, Angel could have sworn that she smelled the aftershave Michael had always worn. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Maybe it was her imagination, maybe it wasn't, but it felt as if Michael was communicating from the beyond, and he was telling her not to blame herself, that his death wasn't her fault. All she had done was to love him and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Suddenly the guilt Angel had been feeling for her part in Michael's death was replaced with something else--anger. Anger against the injustice of what had been stolen from her and Michael. She shouldn't feel guilty; she hadn't killed Michael. Lucas had.

From the first moment Angel had met Lucas, she had known he was evil, had known he was bad for her. Through every cruel thing he had done to her, every terrible thing he had done, like stealing the life of Dureena's unborn child, and threatening the lives of her family, she had still loved him. Angel had never admitted it before, but many times she had wondered if there

was anything Lucas could do that would once and for all kill the love she felt for him.

Now, finally, she had her answer. In the instant Al had revealed the truth about Michael's death and who had been responsible, Angel had felt her love for Lucas being extinguished like a candle being blown out by a violent storm.

Suddenly, Angel felt bile rising in her mouth and struggling up, she quickly rushed upstairs to the bathroom where she vomited, her stomach heaving painfully. Once the violent heaves abated, she straightened, willing the remaining nausea to go away as she moved through to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Baby, who had been lying there, whined softly and moved to her side, placing his head on her lap, trying to comfort his distressed mistress.

Angel looked down at the dog and stroked his head absently. She had been such a stupid, blind fool. She had believed that beneath the Rage was a man worth loving. Now she knew that had just been an illusion, wishful thinking on her part. No man with a shred of humanity in him would have done what Lucas had done. Angel wanted Lucas to pay for what he had done. A life for a life.

Angel groaned as the baby kicked and she put her hand to her swollen belly, willing the child within to settle. His movements reminded her of one very crucial thing.

She couldn't kill Lucas.

Not only because she wasn't a killer, but because if she did the Rage would be passed on to her unborn child. Angel sighed. She couldn't doom her baby so soon.

"So what do I do?" asked Angel of herself.

Rational thought forced itself to the forefront of her mind. She couldn't kill the bastard and she couldn't live with him either, nor could she try to leave. Lucas would never let her go while she was still carrying his child. If she did get away, he'd only hunt her down and bring her back and once she'd given birth, he would undoubtedly kill her. Angel would be damned if she'd let that happen.

Another reason she couldn't leave now, was her condition. Angel knew that physically she wasn't up to any kind of travel. She cursed her difficult pregnancy. Her sisters had never been this weak and ill during their pregnancies.

So she couldn't kill Lucas, as much as she wanted to at that moment, and she couldn't leave. Where did that leave her? Chewing her lip, Angel struggled for the answers. She knew that staying was out of the question, her hatred for Lucas was too strong.

Angel sighed, mulling over other ideas. She could try and get through the next couple of months and wait for the baby to be born before she tried to leave. It seemed the most acceptable answer, although it too was filled with difficulties and danger. If she left, taking the baby with her, Lucas would come after her, killing her and anyone who got in his way, and taking the baby.

[Maybe not,] cut in her inner voice. Angel froze, as a wisp of an idea beginning to form. Who said Lucas would find her? Who said that she wouldn't be able to find some place safe to hide with the baby, saving herself and her child from Lucas' evil? Angel couldn't leave and not take

her baby with her. She had to save herself and the life of the child, before Lucas destroyed them both.

Smiling, Angel stroked her belly. She wanted Lucas to pay for what he had done to Michael and to her, and she wanted to save her child. Killing Lucas wouldn't achieve that, but if she could take from Lucas the one thing he wanted above all else, that would be sweet revenge.

Nodding, Angel patted Baby, who watched with big brown eyes as she rose from the bed and moved over to the window. As she looked out into the darkness she considered what she was going to do.

[Where can you go where Lucas won't find you?]

Angel shook her head. That was the part of the plan she hadn't worked out yet. She needed time to think where she could go or how she would get there. She had a few months before the baby was born to put a solid plan together. But one thing she did know: Angel had friends in the Rangers; friends who would help her disappear with her baby, so Lucas could never find them. She'd find a way to contact those friends sometime after the baby was born.

[There you go again, Scarlett. 'I'll think about it tomorrow'.]

Angel scowled at her inner self. "That's not what I'm doing. Believe me every single day I'll be thinking about it, planning and making sure that whatever I do succeeds. I will get away from that bastard and I will save my child, and in doing so, I'll make Lucas pay for what he did."

[How will you manage to keep your feelings about Lucas hidden? You know he can read you. Any plan you make will hinge on Lucas not sensing trouble or finding out you know about Michael. You know if he does...]

"He won't find out. I'm an Oscar winning actress. I'm motivated not by fame and money this time, but by hatred and the need for revenge. I'm going to put on the performance of a life time and when it comes to the final act, Lucas Buck won't know what hit him!"

[Don't get too cocky, kid,] quipped her inner self again.

"I'm not being cocky, I'm just being positive. If I'm not, I'll falter and give myself away. Lucas will lose something this time, just like I lost Michael. When I take his child away from him, he'll be hurt and he'll know why!"

[Just be careful. Don't let your hatred and need for revenge cloud your judgment. If you do, it'll be you who loses, not Lucas. Just remember who you're dealing with.]

Her voice of reason was right, of course. "I know who... what I'm dealing with. I'll be careful, don't worry. Lucas won't know anything, until it's too late," vowed Angel.

[I hope you're right,] responded her inner voice before falling silent.

She closed her eyes and sent up a silent thought. [Michael, please help me to be brave and to do what needs to be done. To save this child and to make Lucas pay for what he did to you.]

Too wound up to even consider sleeping, Angel remained standing by the window, beginning to

put together a plan. Baby jumped off the bed and came to lie at the feet of his mistress, offering her his support and comfort by placing his head on her foot.

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