

# The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble - Part 3: Twists and Turns

by [The Space Witches](#)

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Trace Miller, hotshot pilot and ace babysitter.

## Chapter 4

Gideon struggled to throw off the bailiff and Galen where they held him back. He had to get to Deborah. He could see the pain she was feeling and knew that she would be blaming herself. Just like him, she always tried to take responsibility for everything. He knew that she would hold herself responsible for Nikarran being on Mars and being murdered, and he knew the grief that would cause her. He had to get to her and help her, but couldn't get out of the grip of the two men who held him back.

He heard the Judge order the court cleared and watched as two more bailiffs came to take Angel away. She was still pleading her innocence and clung to Deborah tightly. Magnusson gently pried Angel's fingers loose, and started to pull her out of Deborah's arms, quietly reassuring them both that he would deal with the new charges, that everything would be all right. Gideon wondered just how much of that was true. He hoped that Magnusson meant every word.

The bailiffs had to half carry Angel from the court, as she had slumped into a posture of total defeat. Her face was ashen and showed nothing but shock, as Deborah tried to follow her out. Suddenly, Lieutenant Carr was standing in front of her, blocking Deborah's way.

"Forget it, Blondie. You're not going anywhere. You can check when regular visiting hours are like everyone else, and join the line to the visiting room. You don't get any special treatment any more."

Gideon finally shook off the hands that restrained him and leaped over the railings separating him from his wife. He ran to her side and put his arm around her, before turning to Carr. "I thought we had a deal. I kept my side of the bargain, what about yours?"

Carr sneered at him. "The deal's off, Captain." Again, she made his title sound like an insult. "That was when we had Denier held on kiddies' charges. Welcome to the real world. Murderers don't get treated like houseguests. She'll get the same treatment as any other prisoner charged with murder. And she won't like it."

Gideon started to protest, but Carr cut him off. "You know where you can put it, Captain. I don't give a damn. You know what? I don't like you, and I don't like your taste in women. You all seem to think you can march into my territory and give your orders about what you want. Well, to hell with that, and to hell with you." She turned on her heel and marched towards the door, through which Angel had been half carried a moment before.

As she left, Gideon lost his temper and yelled after her. "You'll regret this, Carr! I'll make damned sure you regret this."

Carr turned in the doorway and sneered. "Oh, I'm so frightened! Are you going to set your pet Technomage on me then?" She glared over at where Galen stood watching them in silence.

Gideon smiled maliciously. "Wait until I take his muzzle off."

Carr swept out of the door, slamming it behind her.

Gideon held his arm around Deborah's waist and turned to face her. Her eyes were still unfocused, and she seemed barely aware of his presence. He spoke to her softly, "Deborah? Are you all right? We'll get this sorted out, I promise. We won't let Angel be harmed."

She stared over his shoulder and whispered, "Let me go."

Gideon tried again, pulling her close to him, kissing her gently then speaking again. "Deborah, talk to me. We need to talk, to sort things out. Don't just give up on us."

Deborah's eyes never wavered from the spot on the far wall. Her voice was a little stronger as she said again, "Let me go, please." She didn't struggle or move in his arms, but neither did she respond to what he'd said. Gideon could see that she was in shock, but couldn't break through.

He was about to try again, when he felt a hand on his arm and looked round to see that Magnusson had approached them. "I suggest that you do as she asks, Captain. I'd hate to have to bring charges against you for assault, but that's what will happen if you don't let her go."

"Back off, Magnusson. This is between me and my wife." Gideon's voice betrayed the anguish and anger he was feeling, but at this point he hardly cared.

Magnusson smiled. "Oh yes, your wife. Well, that's a technicality that can soon be corrected. I've already offered to act for Ms. Montgomery in the annulment of your marriage. I intend to file papers tomorrow."

Gideon looked at Deborah in horror. "Is that true? Are you going to get an annulment? Deborah,

please, don't do this, we can talk about it, work something out, but for God's sake, don't just leave." He shook her gently, trying to get her attention, but Deborah remained focused on a point far away.

Magnusson protested, "Now that really is going too far, Gideon. Shaking her like that constitutes an assault on her person. If you don't let her go immediately, I'll have the court bailiffs return and take you into custody." Gideon had barely been aware of the court emptying around them, so that only Galen, John and Lily remained to watch. Even they had retreated to the back of the courtroom, where John held Lily as she cried into his shoulder. He doubted if they had heard the words passing between him and Magnusson.

Again, Deborah whispered, "Let me go." This time Gideon did as she asked, and let go of her arms. She didn't move for a moment, not seeming to register that she was no longer restrained. Then she shook herself slightly, and started to move towards the door, eyes still glazed, moving like a sleepwalker. Gideon started to follow, but Magnusson held him back.

"We need to talk, Captain, and we need to talk now. If I'm to stand any chance of getting Angel out of this mess, I need information immediately." Gideon shook off Magnusson's hand and stared at Deborah's back as she exited the courtroom. He turned to the lawyer and spoke.

"Give me a minute to make some arrangements, and I'll be with you." He walked to where Galen, John and Lily stood, Lily still weeping in John's arms. Gideon reached out and gently stroked her back before turning to John.

"Can you go after Deborah? I think Lily should go back to the hotel anyway, but can you make sure that Deborah is OK? She's in shock and I'm worried about her, but I think I'm the last person she needs at the moment." The words nearly choked him, but he knew it was true. He would only make things worse for her right now. Deborah didn't need to see the person responsible for the danger Angel was now in.

John nodded and started to turn with Lily in his arms. Before he left, he looked at Gideon and spoke softly. "I don't know quite how we're going to do it, but somehow we're going to make things right, Matthew. We can't let Angel be prosecuted for a crime she didn't commit. We can't let Demon blame herself for Nikarran's death, and we can't let you and Demon break up. We're just not going to let it happen." He smiled ruefully at Gideon as he spoke.

"God, I hope you're right, John. Because if you're not, I don't know how I'm going to live with myself."

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When Lily heard the Prosecutor bring the charge of murder against Angel, she froze in her seat. This was what she'd seen; this was what had been sent to her from the future. But knowing had not made her able to stop it happening. It hadn't even enabled her to warn anyone. This sight had been too vague, too obscure. She listened, stunned, as the Prosecutor continued to explain the charge, and then it hit her what was being said. Nikarran was dead. Murdered. And Angel was accused of that murder. For a few moments Lily couldn't move, couldn't breathe, as the implications of what was happening rolled over her. Then she leaped to her feet, wanting to get to Angel and Demon, needing to comfort and support them, desperate to do something, anything to help her sisters.

She felt John grab her and hold her back, whispering to her. "No, don't. You'll get yourself thrown out of the court, and then you won't be able to help anyone." Lily turned in his arms and looked up into his face, seeing the sorrow and pain she felt clearly reflected in his eyes.

"But they need me, John. Angel is in such pain, and Demon is in shock. Can't you see that?" She turned back around in his arms and again tried to get to her sisters. Demon was slowly standing and reached out to take Angel in her arms, but Lily could see that Demon wasn't functioning, not reacting or feeling. Lily tried to call to her through their link, but Demon had blocked herself off from everything around her except Angel. She didn't even seem to notice that Matthew was calling out to her, trying to get to her. Lily wondered whether Demon was capable of noticing anything at all, and continued to struggle in John's arms.

Gradually, his soothing words and touches worked their way into her consciousness and Lily began to calm, still sobbing and panting, but she stopped trying to get away from him. She let John turn her around again and buried her head in his shoulder. The sight of Angel being half carried out of the court, slumped between two bailiffs, looking utterly defeated, was too much for her. Lily saw that Matthew had finally broken loose and got to Demon, so she allowed herself to give in to her own emotions. She stopped fighting and let all her pain and anguish at what she had witnessed flow out of her.

She sobbed bitterly into John's broad chest as he pulled her to the back of the court, wondering what they could do now, how they could ever be together as a family again. She cried for the pain of her sisters, and she cried for the loss of their friend. Lily hadn't been as close to Nikarran as Demon, but he'd been a friend to all the sisters and she mourned his loss. But mostly Lily cried because even having seen what was going to happen, she had been unable to prevent it.

She cursed the gift that enabled her to see the future but never seemed to enable her to change it. For all the good her sights were, the future may as well have been written in stone.

Lily felt John's hands, stroking her head and her back, soothing her, calming her, pouring his love into her, his mental voice soft and kind in her head. *[[We'll fix this, Lily. Somehow we'll fix this. We won't allow it to end like this.]]* He lifted her chin and she saw the pain in his eyes as he gently kissed her. Seeing him share her pain was too much and she buried her head back into his shoulder and wept again.

Lily felt a hand touch her back gently and looked round to see Matthew standing behind her. Demon had left while she was weeping, and Lily hadn't felt her sister leave. Demon had blocked their link so successfully, that Lily hadn't even sensed her departure. She began to panic about where Demon would go, and what she would do, and was relieved to hear Matthew ask John to go after her.

John started to turn, to take them both from the court, and Lily eagerly moved with him but stopped again as she heard John speak to Matthew. The sympathy and kindness of his words nearly made her cry again, but this time she refused to allow herself the luxury of more tears. Demon needed them. It was time to go.

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Gideon watched as John led Lily from the court. He then took a deep breath and turned to face Magnusson. "Right. Now tell me what's so important that I can't go after my wife."

"Do you want to save Angel? If you do, you'd better start listening to me, and doing what I say. These charges are a completely different ball game to those originally made against her. These are much more serious. I could get her off the original charges by discrediting your testimony, but these..." Magnusson shook his head. "Well, the ones they have most evidence for relate to the issue of forged identity papers.

Those are the lesser charges, but we'll start there. I want to know everything there is to know about who Angel really is, and where she and her sisters come from. And I mean everything. I can't work in the dark."

Gideon hesitated, wondering if he could really trust this man, but then realized that he had little choice if they were to free Angel. He looked around the courtroom and could see the monitoring devices in each corner. Everything they said and did in this room was being recorded. He gestured towards the devices. "I'm not sure this is the best place to discuss it."

Before he could suggest they move to a more secure place, Galen intervened. "Oh, you don't have to worry about those, Matthew." Galen waved his hand at the cameras, and each one made a small screeching sound, followed by a whiff of smoke emerging from the top. "There, no one can eavesdrop now."

Mentally praying that no one would send him a bill for the damage, Gideon launched into his explanation to Magnusson, telling him the truth about the sisters' background and the details of the fake identities they had put in place for them. "The trouble is that we didn't expect to find Angel. We've only set up identities for Deborah, Ilas and Lily. Now, if Carr starts digging too hard, she'll uncover the whole thing, and we're all in deep shit."

Magnusson nodded, "I can see the problem. You could hardly have them using their original identities. Even with today's technology, explaining how a woman of 290 could give birth would be problematical." He considered for a moment. "Well, the only thing to do is to get Angel added to that passenger list, so when Carr goes looking, it checks out. You added three women, one more shouldn't be a problem." He looked quizzically at Gideon.

Gideon bit down on his temper as he replied, keeping his voice carefully controlled. "No, it wouldn't, if I could get out of here to make the arrangements, but since you stopped me leaving, we're running against a clock here. Carr has a head start, and every minute we spend here talking about it, increases the chance of her finding something before we can fix it."

Galen interrupted again. "I can take care of that easily enough, Matthew. Probably more easily than Lt. Matheson and Mr. Eilerson." He smiled smugly. "I'll go back to the hotel now and get the Lieutenant to show me which files he used, then get to work." He looked seriously at Magnusson. "I expect you to do everything you can to save Angel. She is innocent of these charges, and we must make sure she is cleared. If there is any help I can provide, let Matthew or me know. I will do whatever is in my power to help. And that is quite a lot." He started to turn towards the door, when Gideon stopped him.

"Galen? Do me one more favor? Can you think of something to make Carr's life unpleasant for a while? She really pissed me off."

Galen smiled maliciously. "Pet? Does she think I'm a poodle? I didn't have a top-knot and floppy ears the last time I looked! I've already taken care of her punishment. Lieutenant Carr will shortly learn that a Technomage is nobody's 'pet'. For the next month, Carr will suffer a Technocurse, and every item containing electrical components that she touches will give her a mild shock. Oh, and for some bizarre reason this affliction will extend to any hygiene facility she tries to use. She will have a choice. She can either hover, or get a shock where she will like it least. Never again will the Lieutenant dismiss a Technomage so lightly!" Galen swept out of the room, his black coat trailing behind him.

Magnusson and Gideon watched him go. Magnusson turned and grinned, saying, "Remind me not to

piss off a Technomage. That guy has a warped sense of humor." Then his face fell into more serious lines. "I'm going to find out everything I can about the charge of murder that's been brought against Angel. I have contacts throughout Mars, and we can find out who the victim was, who these so called eye witnesses are, and just how seriously we need to take this."

Gideon looked up at the lawyer. "I think I can tell you who the victim was." He went on to explain about Nikarran, and how he had come to be with Angel. "There's no way that Angel would have done anything to harm Nikarran. He was her protector, the one who looked after her, and we can see what a mess she got into after he'd gone. Why would she have killed him?"

Magnusson nodded. "It doesn't make sense that she would. This makes it even more important that I track down these eye witnesses." He stood thinking for a moment, before looking seriously at Gideon. "There's a lot I still don't know about these women and their history. I don't know what's important and what isn't, but I need to be able to get hold of you at a moment's notice if necessary. I can't tell when I might need you, so I need to know exactly where you'll be. Go back to your hotel room and stay there. And I do mean right there in that room. This could be very important, Captain. For Angel's sake, don't leave that room until you hear from me again."

Gideon protested that he could be contacted at any time over his commlink, but Magnusson shook his head. "I may need to see you in person, or bring other potential witnesses to see you. I need to be sure that I can find you immediately, if necessary. Don't do anything to make it more difficult for me to save Angel."

Gideon reluctantly agreed to go back to the hotel and wait. As Magnusson turned to leave, he stopped him for a moment. "Magnusson, I don't know how I'm going to pay you for this work. You ought to be aware that the house was the only asset I had."

Magnusson turned back and smiled. "But the house is still yours. The deal was that I had to get Angel acquitted. I haven't done that yet. The original charges may have been dropped, but that isn't an acquittal. Don't worry Captain, I still plan to take that house away from you, but I'll do it according to the terms of our deal."

Gideon looked up at the gigantic figure for a moment, surprised at his response. Then he held out his hand, "Thank you. Then the deal is still on." He waited for his hand to be crushed again as Magnusson shook it, but was surprised when he only got a normal grip.

"Just remember, Captain. Don't leave that room."

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Magnusson walked out of the court and headed over to the Security Station, his mind torn between two themes. First came thoughts of the case he was now committed to. He had a number of lines of inquiry he could make to get to the bottom of these charges, and planned to set them in motion as soon as he'd had chance to look at the witness statements that Security had taken.

But the person who dominated his thoughts was Demon. As soon as he'd seen her in her sister's cell earlier that afternoon, he'd felt another flare of lust. He had to have that woman. It wasn't just a physical thing any more, either. He'd admired the way she'd held herself together in the face of so many shocks, and been touched by the depth of her devotion to her sister. Yes, he still wanted to fuck her, but Magnusson found that he wanted more. One night wouldn't be enough with this woman. This woman would need time to be explored and discovered, and to do that he needed to make damned

sure she stayed well away from her husband.

His main motivation for refusing to accept that he'd done his job in securing Angel's acquittal was not honorable. The lawyer smiled to himself as he thought about it. Gideon probably admired his honesty, but that wasn't why he'd done it. If he took Gideon's house, what excuse would he have to continue working on the case? And he wanted to keep working on it, as that would bring him into contact with Demon.

Magnusson was pleased with the way the evening had gone. He'd managed to detain Gideon so that Demon had left alone, and had also planted the idea of the annulment firmly in her mind. He could use the seriousness of Angel's situation to drive a further wedge between her and Gideon, playing on the fact that it was the Captain's charges that had got Angel arrested in the first place. If she hadn't been taken in on those stupid charges, she wouldn't be in such serious trouble now. Every opportunity he could find, he would now use to exploit and increase the rift between Demon and Gideon.

This was Magnusson's main reason for insisting that Gideon stayed in his hotel room. Yes, he might need to contact Gideon for information at short notice, but realistically he could do that anywhere. His motive in insisting that Gideon stayed put was solely to keep him away from Demon. He had a suspicion that if those two got together they would soon be reconciled, and that Magnusson couldn't allow. But he needed to be careful, neither of them was stupid and if they caught on to what he was up to... well, he'd rather not get a shock to his favorite organ whenever he took a piss.

Magnusson was determined to get Angel cleared of the charges that had been brought against her, because he knew just how grateful Demon would be when he'd done that. He had every intention of taking Gideon's house away from him as his price for doing that job, but he also had every intention of taking Gideon's wife as a bonus.

Magnusson smiled to himself as he entered the Security Station. Everything was falling into place.

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Angel was brought to a stand still by the two guards as they reached the door of her cell. One guard deactivated the lock and the door slid open, then she felt herself suddenly propelled forward by the strong hands of the other guard. Stumbling, she lost her balance and fell hard onto the cold floor of the cell. She lay there, too stunned to move or pay mind to the two guards, who laughed at her before the door closed behind her.

She turned her head to look at the door and slowly pulled herself up off the floor. Wincing as she stood, she noticed for the first time that she had banged her knee when she fell. She ignored it as she limped to the bed and sat down, staring at the heavy metal door.

She felt completely numb as she went over what had just happened in court. They thought she had killed Nikarran. "But I didn't do it. I didn't..." Angel whispered desperately. How could they think she would ever do something like that to the one person who had been her lifeline, her friend?

A small anguished moan escaped her throat, as negative thoughts flooded her mind. Self-blame, guilt, anxiety and fear about what was going to happen to her. She felt as if she was drowning, and she was too weary and tired to stay afloat. Angel had never felt so alone and defeated in her life. Why was this happening to her? Shaking her head and staring down at her shoes, she knew that she should try and pull herself together. Falling apart wouldn't help her. She should be trying to figure out how this had happened, she should be screaming at the injustice of it, shouting that she was innocent. But she

was just too numb to think straight, or to fight right now. "Later... I'll deal with it later..." But for now, she just wanted to sit there quietly, trying to hold herself together.

Her head snapped up and her eyes filled with fear as the door opened and a solidly built female guard entered, carrying a small bundle. The guard's face was an unfriendly mask, her eyes cold as she walked over to Angel and tossed the bundle at her. "Take your clothes off and put that on."

Angel stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded. Her lack of response seemed to annoy the guard, who moved forward and took hold of Angel's arm roughly, dragging her to her feet. Angel yelped at the vice-like grip on her arm.

"Listen, bitch. You can either do it yourself or I do it for you." The guard threatened coldly, as she let go of Angel's arm. Angel shuddered. She didn't doubt the guard's words.

Rubbing her bruised upper arm, Angel looked at the bundle on the bed and reached for it. On top was a pair of simple white lace-up shoes. She put them on the floor, then picked up and unfolded the other item. It was a plain faded gray jumpsuit with a number printed above the left breast. She looked at it for a moment, then put it back on the bed. With shaky hands, she took off her jacket and put it down on the bed beside the jumpsuit.

As she started to unbutton the shirt, she was aware of the guard's eyes on her, watching her every move. Turning, Angel looked at her, about to ask her to turn around. She wasn't what you would call a shy person, but she wasn't comfortable having a complete stranger watch her strip. Before she could speak, the guard laughed, anticipating her words. "You got nothing I ain't seen before, sweetheart. Just hurry up. I ain't got all day."

Angel sighed softly, turned her back to the guard and continued to remove the rest of her clothes. Once stripped to her underwear, she reached for the jumpsuit, pulling down the zipper to step into it. She slid her arms into the long sleeves, then pulled it up over her shoulders and zipped it up. Sitting, she put on the shoes and tied up the laces. Careful not to put too much weight on her hurt knee, she stood and watched, as the guard bundled up her clothes and headed back towards the door.

Moving forward, she called out to the guard. "Wait! Please, when will I be allowed to see my sisters?" The woman stopped and turned around. Looking Angel up and down, she laughed and without answering, she opened the door and left.

For a long time, Angel just stood there, alone and afraid in the coldness of the cell. Finally, she was unable to prevent herself remembering, as scenes and memories from the court flashed unrelentingly in her mind.

The joyous moment of seeing Lily and Ilas, being held by them, remembering their words of love. The guilt and shame when she saw Dureena, wanting to reach out to her and beg her forgiveness. Gideon arriving with Galen, the look of pain and loss in Gideon's eyes as he looked at Demon, who refused to acknowledge his presence. Galen's eyes as they bored into her. Dureena's screams as the judge dismissed the charges. The fear and realization of what that meant. The awful, unbelievable moment when the prosecutor read the charge of murder against her and the knowledge of what that could mean. The confusion, anger and chaos that erupted. Everybody jumping up and moving, shouting, crying out in fear, shock and anger.

Everything in her mind blurred together in a noisy, overwhelming crescendo until Angel clamped her hands over her ears and screamed out in her own anguish. "Nooooo!" As a floodgate opened, she threw



herself down on the bed, buried her face in the pillow and sobbed. Angel lashed out, hitting and pummeling the bed and pillow as she cried out at the unfairness of what was happening to her. "Enough! I've had enough. No more! No more!!" She continued lashing out, hitting the pillow with her fists until she tired.

Her sobs became intermittent, until they eventually stopped and she lay unmoving. Finally, Angel stirred and turned on her back, then slowly sat up on the edge of the bed. Taking in a deep breath, she stood and moved over to the basin where she washed her face in the water Demon had left for her, the coolness soothing her flushed cheeks. Picking up the small hand towel Demon had also left behind, Angel dried herself then straightened up, looking at her reflection, taking in the red puffy eyes with their haunted look.

For a long while, she just looked at herself, breathing slowly, as something inside her shifted. A determination and a strength that had been lacking for a long time returned. "I won't be beaten by this," Angel told her reflection softly.

She was innocent of killing her guardian, and she wasn't going to lie down and give up. Nodding at herself, she turned around and walked over to the small table that had been left in the center of the cell. Pulling the chair back, she sat down, clasping her hands together on the top of the table. She sat nervously and waited for Magnusson to arrive. She refused to give in again to the fear, anxiety and guilt that would prevent her from fighting the charges brought against her. Thinking about her sisters helped to keep those negative feelings away. Angel had a reason to fight. She never wanted to be taken away from them again.

"Not ever again."

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Luke looked down at where Faylinn lay in his arms, feeding on her bottle contentedly, and smiled. He looked across to where Trace was holding Vya, also trying to give him a bottle, but with rather less success. They'd fed Dasha and Marcus first, both babies behaving themselves, taking their bottles, then falling asleep. Faylinn was also behaving, but Vya wasn't being so cooperative. He was kicking out, turning his head away from the bottle that Trace was trying to feed him and screaming.

Trace let out a sigh of exasperation. "Why doesn't it surprise me that this is Max's son? He has the same charming, good tempered, amenable temperament as his father!"

Luke laughed. "Vya is normally quite a sweetie. It's just that he's not used to being away from his mothers and father. And he's used to getting his dinner straight from the source, not from a bottle. Here, let me try." He held out Faylinn, offering to swap with the young pilot.

Trace shook his head. "Damned if I'm going to let a month old baby Eilerson defeat me." He looked at Luke quizzically. "Is that really true, Doc? Is this kid only a month old? He looks older than your daughter there."

Luke nodded. "That's right, he was born a month ago." He went on to explain how Ilas' species grew and matured much faster than humans. "Which is why he's already as big as Marcus and bigger than the twins. From the scans I've done, Ilas seems to have made him pretty much completely her own species. There are only a few of Max's genes there. But she couldn't resist Max's baby blue eyes, so unlike his mother, Vya's eyes stay one color. And I think she made sure that her baby got his father's intelligence. That child is going to be a genius."

Trace groaned. "Oh, that's just what we need around the place. A shape-shifting Max Eilerson. One thing you have to say for the original, he's a big old sonofabitch. At least you can see him coming and get out of the way. When this one grows up, he'll be taking everyone by surprise. You'll think that you're having a conversation with a normal human being then, wham! That whiplash tongue will strike and lacerate you in fifteen different languages, then steal your wallet!" He tried again to get the baby to take the bottle but with little success, then continued. "You said Ilas made him like her own species. How did she do that? I mean, humans don't get to pick which genes come from which parent."

"Good question. I'm still trying to work that one out. A lot of things Ilas does don't make sense. How she manages to restructure her muscles, bones, skin, everything, when she shifts is beyond me. Somehow, she has voluntary control over parts of her body structure that in the rest of us are fixed, and she seems to have passed that ability onto her son." Luke looked over and nodded at Vya. "Believe it or not he's being pretty stable at the moment. He rarely has tantrums, but when he does... well, he can shift into the most weird and wonderful shapes, all humanoid, but some barely so. Talk about a handful! It's a damned good job that he's generally a good-tempered little thing."

Trace finally managed to get the bottle into Vya's mouth and near silence descended on the room, the only sounds those of contented sucking. Luke looked across at Trace and commented, "You're not bad with a bottle you know. Where did you learn that?"

Trace told him about his sister's children, two girls who he'd helped with when they were tiny. "Before I got the job with IPX that ended up with the Excalibur. They're back on Earth, and for a while, I didn't think I was ever going to see them again." He grinned across at Luke. "But I got a message yesterday, they've been notified that they should attend their local Treatment Center next week. Then they'll be cured. And I know that a lot of the credit for that is down to you, Doc. Thanks."

Luke blushed slightly, uncomfortable with the praise. He'd tried to keep his own contribution to the cure as little known as possible, shifting attention towards Sarah Chambers as much as he could. He knew that she wouldn't thank him for that, but he hated the thought of becoming the sort of celebrity that Gideon was. He was still amazed that the wedding and problems since had not hit the press. If they ever found out that the Galactic Hero's sister-in-law had been charged with murder... Luke shuddered at the thought. His attention was brought back to the present when Trace groaned.

"Oh hell. This has gone in one end and straight out the other. He's wet." Trace stood carefully, taking the now empty bottle from Vya's mouth. "I'll change him."

Luke looked slightly alarmed. "Maybe I'd better do that, Trace, he can be a bit of a handful."

Trace refused his help, taking the baby over to the chest of drawers with the changing mat on top and asking where the diapers were kept. He skillfully removed the wet diaper, then paused. "Um... Doc? I thought this was supposed to be a little boy? He seems to be missing something."

Luke stood, holding Faylinn to his shoulder, as she'd nearly fallen asleep. Standing beside Trace, he looked down at Vya, who was currently very much *not* a boy. "He does that sometimes. It's part of the shape-shifting thing. Sometimes he's a boy, and then he's a girl. Now you know how his mother managed to get Dureena pregnant. The thing to be careful of is when he shifts back..."

His warning came too late. Vya shifted back to male, grew a penis in seconds and used it to pee straight up Trace's nose.

Trace shot backwards, wiping his face on his sleeve. "You little bastard! Well, if I hadn't known before, I'd know who the hell your father was now. And I bet you grow up to be a lousy dancer just like him!"

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Lily burst through the door, closely followed by John and Galen, who immediately crossed to the computer terminal and started conferring silently.

"Is Demon here?" she asked as she ran up to Luke, obviously worried.

Luke stopped pacing and nodded as he turned to her, his face grim. "She arrived barely a minute ago and went straight into her bedroom. Or should I say sleepwalked? She seemed to be in shock. She didn't even acknowledge our presence," he nodded to Trace, who sat on the sofa, "or react when I called her. But I didn't dare to disturb her without knowing what happened." He hugged Lily, then held her at arm's length. "So what did happen, Lily?"

Lily hesitated. She really wanted to go to Demon to try and help her, but she clamped down on her anxiety. Luke was right, he needed to know. She let him lead her to the sofa to sit down, then waited impatiently as Luke thanked Trace for his help and said that they would take care of the children now.

Trace nodded as he stood. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do. I'll stay nearby, just in case." He gave Lily an encouraging smile.

"Thank you, Trace." Her grateful smile was small but heartfelt.

As Trace left, Luke sat down beside her, and she quickly recounted what had happened in court. Her voice quivered when she got to where the new charges had been brought. "Angel didn't do it, Luke. She could never kill someone. Especially Nikarran..." Her voice failed, and she closed her eyes to compose herself, to suppress the anger that welled up inside her at the uselessness of her gift. She could feel Luke squeeze her hand, silently supporting her. After a few seconds, she looked up into his eyes, conveying her gratitude as well as her pain and fears. "I can't think of anything we can do for her. But we have to help Demon now!"

Luke nodded. "I hope you can get through to her."

John, having led Galen to the door, sat on Lily's other side and looked at her, taking her right hand into his. "What can we do to help?"

Lily shook her head ruefully. "I'm afraid nothing at the mo..." Her last word was drowned in a gasp, as a wave of despair, grief and loss washed over them, making John and Luke wince.

"Demon!" Lily closed her eyes and called out to Ilas, *[[Come quickly! We have to help Demon!]]* Without waiting for an answer, she withdrew from their link and jumped up, running towards the second bedroom. She hadn't reached the door when a second, stronger wave hit them. And this time, all four children started to wail in the other bedroom. Lily resisted the maternal urge to turn around and go soothe her children--to her surprise she could clearly distinguish which voices belonged to Faylinn and Dasha--but called to her men, "Go!" At the same moment as she opened the door to Demon's room, the door buzzer rang, and she heard Luke's voice call for it to open. Moments after she'd reached Demon, Ilas was at her side, and Lily heard her sharp intake of breath as they both saw the state their eldest sister was in.

Lily had let Ilas know through their link what had happened after she, Max and Dureena had left the court, but seeing Demon lying sprawled on the bed, wracked by uncontrollable sobs, and feeling the waves of negative emotions emanating from her, still came as a shock to the shape-shifter. Lily was trying to soothe Demon with words and touches through their link, but to no avail.

*[[Help me Ilas, she's blocking! Maybe together, we can get through to her.]]*

Ilas hurried to sit on Demon's other side, joining with Lily in sending calm and love at their eldest sister, stroking her head and back. *[[Please, Demon. We'll find a way to help Angel. But we need you, we need your help!]]*

*[[We can't live without you, Demon! Come back to us, please!]]*

Ilas flinched as the next wave hit them. Despite not being as influenced by Demon's sendings as those outside their link, the sheer intensity of her current projections made them painful, almost impossible to bear. Even more so for their children, who hadn't learned how to deal with them yet. They could hear their wails and sobs growing louder and more desperate with each sending.

Ilas looked at Lily, trying not to let herself be overwhelmed with panic. *[[What can we do, Lily?]]*

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She was drowning. Drowning in a sea of darkness, pitch black, nowhere to go, nothing to hold on to, no light to show her a way out. Nothing to draw hope from. She was caught in a maelstrom of thoughts, fears, accusations. [You drove Nikarran to his death, your friend and confidant for so many years. Your lack of control made you lose Matthew, your love, your life. And now you'll lose Angel too, your sister, your flesh and blood. All because of your selfishness. You swore that if ever you and Angel wanted the same man, you'd back off and let her have him! Lost, everything lost, everybody lost, all your fault! You should have known better! You should have done something... anything... nothing! Mea culpa! All your fault!] On and on it went. The pain and guilt were too much to bear, too much to control. It cut through her, tearing right through the core of her being, her heart, her soul, her mind, ensnaring her and pulling her deeper into despair. Deeper and deeper. [I'm drowning!]

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Lily looked at Ilas, desperately trying to form a coherent thought in between Demon's sobs and painful sendings and the children's wails. Ilas looked just as torn, stricken and close to panic as she felt herself.

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John tried to send calm and reassurance to the wailing children, but Demon's sendings were just too strong. He looked at Luke, seeing him struggling against the effect the constant waves of negative emotions had on him. [Even partially blocked, they're bad!] John briefly touched his lover's mind and enclosed him in his shields. Luke took a deep breath and smiled at him, grateful for the short respite, then immediately concentrated on his task again. But all four children kept on screaming.

John contacted Lily. *[[We have to get the children out of here!]]*

*[[We can't get through to Demon, she's blocking and she's getting worse! We have to do something,*

*John. We have to help her!]]*

He could feel the rising panic in Lily's mind and tried to send reassurance and love. *[[Stop it, Lily. Don't let yourself be drawn down too!]]* His thoughts were racing. *[[Get out of there. You, Ilas and Luke have to get the children to Max's suite, where they'll be shielded from Demon's sendings.]]* Before Lily could protest he added, *[[I'll stay here. I can block her to some extent. I'm afraid there's only one person who can possibly get through to her now. And if he doesn't...]]*

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In Demon's bedroom, Lily gasped, then braced herself and stood, grabbing Ilas' arm and pulling her with her. "Come on. We have to help our children! Everything depends on Matthew now!" She didn't dare to think of the consequences if he didn't succeed.

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Gideon paced up and down the living area of the hotel suite. He didn't want to be there. He wanted to be at the Security station, making sure that Angel was being properly cared for, he wanted to be with Deborah, helping her through the shock of hearing about Nikarran's death, he wanted to be out with Magnusson, finding out what the hell had happened to Nikarran. He wanted to be almost anywhere but stuck in this damned hotel room! But this is where Magnusson had told Gideon to stay, had told him that he would be most useful, so this is where he stayed. But he didn't have to like it and was working up a head of steam that someone was going to get full force, when it blew.

When the comm. unit beeped, Gideon lunged across the room to hit the receive button, almost shouting, "Yes," at the screen. To his surprise it wasn't Magnusson who looked out at him, but John Matheson. "John? Is there a problem?" He could only imagine there was, or why wouldn't John have just come down to see him? They were only a few floors apart.

John nodded. "Yes, there is. A rather serious one. Matthew, can you come up here? Now?"

Gideon frowned. "Why? Magnusson told me to stay put in case he needed me. I don't want to..." He ran down as he saw John shaking his head.

"Matthew, this is important. Reprogram the comm. unit to forward your calls, and I'll tell reception to send any visitors directly up here. It's Demon. Please, get up here now."

Gideon's stomach turned. He hit the close control and quickly reprogrammed the unit, then threw himself out of the door, before it was half open.

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"Where is she? What's the matter?" Gideon was gasping for air as he pushed through the half open door to John's suite. The elevator hadn't come quickly enough for him, so he'd run up eight flights of stairs to get there, thinking as he ran that he ought to spend more time in the gym shooting hoops.

John stopped him as he entered and nodded to a door on the far side of the living area. "She's in there. Matthew, she's in trouble and I don't..." He paused as a wave of emotion hit them both. Gideon staggered backwards as the force of it hit him. It was a wave of grief, guilt, loss, despair and anguish, all wound up together. The combined effect was to drive him momentarily into a pit of depression the likes of which he'd never experienced. For one appalling instant, Gideon could see no point in living, no

possibility of anything good ever happening again, no chance of ever achieving his goals or ever experiencing happiness. It was devastating. Even after the loss of the Cerberus, he hadn't felt that bad. Then it faded.

"What the hell was that?" Gideon gasped the words out, finding it even more difficult to breathe now than when he'd arrived.

John's face showed the aftermath of his pain clearly. He managed to get one word out between gritted teeth. "Demon."

Gideon lunged towards the door, but John held him back. "You need to know what you're going into. I can't get through to her, Matthew, and neither can Lily or Ilas. She's blocking out everything and everyone. She's totally focused on her misery. I heard about this sort of thing when I was in Psi Corps. Sometimes a telepath, or in this case an empath, can lock themselves into a cycle of self-destruction, a vicious circle of depression and pain, which they can't break out of without help. But they have to let someone help them. Demon isn't allowing that. She won't let any of us help her, and if she goes on like this..." He looked sadly into Gideon's eyes, "Matthew, if she goes on like this she'll either lose her mind or her life."

Gideon tugged against the hold John had on his arm, but John hadn't finished. "I'm hoping that you can get through to her. Lily and Luke have taken the children over to Ilas. The external walls of these suites are well enough shielded to prevent her projections going beyond here but..." Matheson stopped again as another wave hit them. After a few moments, he resumed, "Within the suite, you can feel the full effect. I can shield it to some extent, but Matthew, if you go in there," he pointed to the bedroom door, "she could take you down with her. You could end up in the same state that she's in."

Gideon looked at his friend. "Do you think I care? If I can't get her back then... Well, what she's sending now would be the least of my problems." He took a deep breath and gently pried John's hand loose from his arm. "Thanks for calling me. I'll go and see what I can do."

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

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