

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

by [The Space Witches](#)

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The prodigal son's return isn't greeted with joy by some...

Chapter 3

Matheson signaled the door to the suite he shared with Lily, Luke and their children to open, expecting to see Gideon outside. They'd been waiting for him for some time, and John had been about to call him to see what had caused the delay, when the door buzzer sounded. As soon as he looked through the open door, the reason became obvious.

"Galen." John nodded his head, keeping his tone carefully neutral. He and the Technomage had never been close, and John had sometimes wondered whether this was caused by a degree of jealousy. Each of them valued their friendship with Gideon. Each was not entirely comfortable with how close the other was to their friend.

John stood back to let them enter the suite, wondering how Lily would react to the two new arrivals. She'd been angry and upset the previous day when Gideon had called Security to arrest Angel, and her distress had increased significantly when they realized that Demon had left Gideon. Lily, Luke and John had talked far into the night about the implications for all of them if Demon and Gideon became permanently estranged, eventually concluding that it couldn't be allowed to happen. They all had too much to lose, Demon and Gideon more than anyone. Somehow, the couple had to be reconciled.

Lily had quelled her anger and told John that for Demon's sake, she would try to understand and forgive Matthew for what he'd done. John's concern now was that her resolution was going to be severely tested by Gideon arriving with Galen in tow. He could only assume that Galen must have given Gideon some explanation for his behavior that had been accepted. John wondered whether that

explanation would be shared with them all.

He watched quietly from the door as Galen and Gideon moved into the room toward where the others were sitting. The suite they occupied had a large central living area with two bedrooms leading off. Two sofas faced each other across a low table in the middle of the living area, and this was where everyone had gathered. Lily and Sarah sat on one sofa, with Faylinn and Dasha sitting in their laps, all watching the table intently. Alwyn and Luke sat opposite them on the other sofa. Luke was also watching the table closely, while Alwyn observed his audience.

In the center of the table sat a small golden dragon. It was plump, with tiny wings, big red eyes and a very silly grin. Tiny gestures from Alwyn moved the dragon around the table, investigating the objects there, getting its head stuck in an empty coffee mug, then sitting back on its haunches with the mug over its head, shaking vigorously. Eventually, it got its paws either side of the mug and pushed hard, sending the mug flying across the room and causing the dragon to somersault backwards. The two children were giggling at its antics and the adult audience was smiling fondly, not really noticing the new arrivals.

Suddenly, a tiny fireball zoomed in behind the baby dragon and goosed it. The dragon leaped up, trying to reach under its tail with its paws, but its butt was too big to reach around. The fireball chased the dragon round the table, zipping around its head then back under its tail, while the dragon tried to catch it in its mouth. The whole audience was now laughing, apparently unaware of the source of the fireball, until Alwyn turned to Galen and spoke.

"You were always very clever with those fireballs, Galen. Glad to see that you've kept your hand in."

John watched as Lily turned to look at the new arrival, poised to intervene if she lost her temper. But she retained control, contenting herself with a glare, first at Galen then at Gideon, before turning her attention back to the dragon's antics, which continued on the table.

Sarah stood and passed Dasha to Luke, who nodded at Galen before also looking back at the table. She moved round and kissed Galen lightly on the cheek, then spoke quietly. "I've missed you, Galen. It's good to see you again." Alwyn joined them, making one last gesture at the table.

"That should keep them occupied for a while. Can you put the fireball on autopilot Galen? It will keep the children entertained."

Galen nodded and gestured, then he, Sarah, John, Gideon and Alwyn moved to the dining table on the far side of the room, where plates of food and drink had been laid out.

When he saw the food on the table, Gideon realized that he hadn't gotten around to eating that day, and suddenly felt ravenous. He started to load a plate with sandwiches as he spoke quietly, aiming his comments at Matheson.

"Galen wants to rejoin us. He's explained to me why he felt he had to help Lucas and I've accepted his explanation. But this has to be a joint decision. If anyone on the team feels they can't live with it, we need to know."

Before Matheson could respond, Galen interrupted. "Matthew, I was willing to tell you my reasons for what I did. Alwyn already knows what they are, and I would be happy for you to share those reasons

with Sarah and John. But I cannot have that information known by others. I must ask you all to promise that you will not tell anyone else, and I include the sisters, Max and Dureena in that. They must not know what I have told you."

Gideon stared at Galen, then shook his head. "You're making this impossible, Galen. There's no way that Max, Ilas, and Dureena are just going to accept my word that you had a good reason for your actions. Why can't you at least tell Max and Dureena? You've known them long enough. You've known Dureena longer than any of us. Surely you trust her?"

Galen shook his head. "I do not trust Max Eilerson." He looked up at Gideon and frowned. "Would you trust him with something like this, Matthew? Something he could use for profit?" Gideon didn't answer him, because he couldn't. While it would be nice to believe that Max had changed due to his involvement with both Dureena and Ilas, Gideon couldn't bring himself to trust the new and improved Max. While Gideon didn't mind believing in some things that others found far-fetched, he still didn't believe in ghosts, fairies at the bottom of the garden or that Max Eilerson wouldn't sell his own mother, if the price were right.

Galen nodded. "And given their current relationship, I cannot trust Dureena not to pass this knowledge to him. I'm sorry, Matthew. They must not be told."

Gideon paused, staring at Galen, before reaching a decision. "It's your call Galen, but remember, you have to convince them all. I won't order them to accept you. And as for Deborah..." he swallowed quickly, burying the pain that even mentioning her name produced, "Well at the moment, your best hope of a reconciliation with her would be if I told her to stay as far away from you as possible. I suspect that she'll do exactly the opposite of anything I ask her just now."

Alwyn shook his head sadly. "Captain, you have our sympathies, and if there is anything we can do in the limited time we now have..."

Gideon shook his head. "I don't think there's anything you can do, but thanks. I'm just hoping that she'll calm down, when we get Angel acquitted." He gave a brief summary of the actions he and Max had taken so far. "The preliminary hearing will be at 18.00 hours. John, you'll need to be there and I assume that Lily will insist on accompanying you?"

John nodded. "Luke is going to stay here and look after the twins, Vya and Marcus. Ilas, Dureena, and Max all want to be there, so we've drafted in some help for Luke." Gideon watched as a rare mischievous smile spread across John's face. "Sarah and Alwyn have to leave soon so they couldn't help."

John's smile was infectious, and Gideon couldn't help grinning in return as he asked, "So who have you drafted?"

"Trace."

Gideon started to laugh. "Trace Miller? Since when has he been hiring out as a babysitter?"

John explained that Trace was apparently very fond of babies and had often babysat for his sister's children. When he'd dropped by earlier that day and they'd explained their problem, he'd immediately volunteered to help Luke, while the others went to the hearing.

They continued to discuss arrangements for the evening, while Sarah was describing her work on

Earth to Galen, occasionally interrupted by sounds of laughter from the sofas as the baby dragon and fireball continued to cavort around the table. The atmosphere warmed as the talk continued, and Gideon began to relax for the first time since the wedding. For a few moments, he started to feel that maybe it would be possible to bring everyone back together, to heal the rifts that had split his friends and family apart.

These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door buzzer. Gideon watched as Matheson tensed and spoke quietly. "That will be Max, Ilas and Dureena." He looked over at Galen and smiled ruefully, "You'd better brace yourself," before turning to answer the door.

Gideon watched John greet the newcomers as they explained the reason for their late arrival, the three of them still unaware of the Technomage's presence. He turned from the scene at the door, to glance at Galen who was standing very still, his face expressionless. For the first time, Gideon realized that Galen was nervous about what was about to come.

A loud hiss followed by a curse from Max brought Gideon's attention back sharply to the door. Max, Ilas and Dureena were staring in their direction, their faces masks of hatred and anger as they saw who was standing beside him.

Gideon barely had time to register Dureena's movement as she flung herself towards them, a knife in her hand. Pure instinct got Gideon moving, as he placed himself between the angry Zanderi and the Technomage. The next thing he was aware of was the knife leaving Dureena's hand and flying past his head. Gideon turned to see the knife embedded deeply into the wall behind him, having missed his head by no more than a couple of centimeters. Then slowly he turned to look at Dureena, who was standing with her hands on her hips, her chest heaving, a look of horror on her face, as she realized how close she'd come to killing the wrong man.

For a long moment, the room fell into deathly silence, as everyone looked at Dureena and Gideon. Even the holo-dragon and fireball had stopped cavorting on the table as if they too were aware of the drama unfolding. Then the silence was broken as Faylinn started to cry. Her frightened wails sent off a chain reaction, as Dasha also started to sob, followed by Vya, held in Ilas' arms.

Gideon sensed a movement to one side of him, and turned his head slightly to watch as John moved over to the sofa, where Lily and Luke were trying to quiet their frightened children. Max and Ilas were trying to do the same with Vya.

John was the first to speak as he helped Lily gather up Faylinn. "I think maybe you, Luke and Ilas should take the babies into the bedroom." Gideon turned to watch Max, as he tried to convince Ilas to go with Lily and Luke.

"But I want to stay," Ilas spoke angrily as she glanced over at Galen then back to Max. Max put his arm around Ilas and spoke softly into her ear. Whatever he said obviously convinced her, as with one last angry glare at Galen, she moved over to join Lily and Luke who had gathered up the twins. It was at that moment that Alwyn cleared his throat, and moved over to Sarah, placing his arm around her waist. Gideon couldn't help but smile to himself. [Way to go, Alwyn. You show her how you feel.]

The usually arrogant and self-confident Technomage looked a little uncomfortable as he let his eyes travel around everyone before he spoke. "I'm afraid that it's time for the lovely Doctor and me to bid you farewell." This was the nearest Alwyn had come to a public declaration of his feelings towards

Sarah, but as far as Gideon could tell, it went straight over her head, and didn't attract any comments or glances from his audience. Gideon decided that everyone was too distracted to see what was in front of their noses. He wondered whether he would have noticed himself if he and Alwyn hadn't had their discussion when they were testing on Theta 49.

The next few moments became increasingly bizarre as Alwyn and Sarah made their good-byes. The tension in the room could have been cut with a knife, if the knife hadn't remained in full view of everyone, embedded in the wall. John offered to see them off but Alwyn declined, whispering that he thought it best that John remain, just in case things got out of hand. Then with a few more hugs and kisses for the babies, Sarah and Alwyn left. Luke, Lily and Ila disappeared quickly into the bedroom with the babies, the door closing quietly behind them.

Gideon watched as John moved to stand beside him, then focused his attention on Dureena, who shook off the comforting hand Max had placed on her shoulder. Dureena no longer seemed aware of Gideon as she moved forward to pass him and get at Galen, who stood silently, bracing himself for her attack. But again Gideon stood in Dureena's way, bringing her up short. This time she turned her glare on him and again tried to get past him. His voice stopped her.

"Going somewhere?" Gideon tried to keep his voice neutral. He had to diffuse this situation before someone ended up dead.

He watched as Dureena pulled herself up straight and slowly tore her eyes away from Galen to look at him. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and tight with all the anger and hatred she felt at seeing Galen. "Get out of my way, Captain."

"Why Dureena? So you can kill him?"

Dureena turned golden eyes filled with hate on Galen. "Yes."

Gideon sighed and shook his head. "And what would that accomplish? It won't bring your baby back." At the mention of her lost child, Dureena's head snapped up and Gideon could see tears well in her eyes. Before Dureena could say anything, Max moved forward. This time when the xenoarcheologist put his arm around Dureena, the thief didn't try to shake him off.

When Max spoke, his voice was deceptively calm. "No, but it would make us feel better if that bastard paid for helping our baby's killer get away."

This time it was Galen who came forward and spoke for the first time. "Maximilian ... Dureena ... believe me, if there were anything I could do to make up for my actions, I would gladly do it."

Dureena's face turned into a sneer. "You can die!"

Gideon stepped forward again, raising a hand to cut Galen off before he spoke again. "Look, Dureena, I know how angry you feel, but Galen's death wouldn't solve anything. It would just make things worse. And you may not want to hear this or believe this, but Galen did have a valid reason for helping Lucas escape."

Dureena snorted, "Really? What possible reason could there be for him to betray us like that?" There was a long pause as Dureena looked from Gideon to Galen waiting for one of them to answer her. It was Galen who spoke first.

"If I could tell you Dureena, I would. But for now, I cannot disclose my reasons."

"No?" Dureena looked up at Gideon. "But I guess he could tell you, otherwise why would you stop me killing him?"

Gideon nodded. "Yes, he did. And I understand how important those reasons were to him, so I've accepted his explanation and asked him to join us again..." Dureena's cold laugh prevented him continuing.

"What, are you suggesting that we forgive this sonofabitch and take him back? Based on what? His word that he had a good reason?" Dureena's tone was incredulous.

Gideon moved closer to Dureena. "I know how angry you are, but please believe me, Galen did have a reason for what he did." Dureena stepped away angrily from Gideon.

"How can you side with him? You were as angry as the rest of us about his betrayal. Hell, you probably thought about killing him yourself. Now, suddenly, you're all friends again?" Gideon could feel her anger and couldn't blame her for turning on him as well. For a long moment, he remained silent, as he tried to figure out what he could say next.

Again, Gideon moved closer to Dureena, and placed a hand on her shoulder. For a moment, his eyes locked with Max's, who Gideon could see was as angry as Dureena, but was saying nothing.

Gideon looked deeply into Dureena's eyes and gave her a gentle smile. "You trust me, don't you, Dureena? Have I ever broken a promise to you?" He watched her eyes widen as his words hit home. Dureena knew the price Gideon had paid to keep his word to her, the price he was still paying. Gideon smiled gently at her. "Remember I once told you that killing off your trust wasn't fair game? I still believe that."

Gideon waited, and for a moment, he thought that Dureena was going to tell him to go directly to hell, but then suddenly the thief nodded, regretfully. "Yes, I trust *you*, but not the Technomage!"

Gideon smiled, then looked over his shoulder at Galen, before he turned to her again. "Then I'm going to ask you to trust me on this. Galen has explained his reasons to me, and I accept them. For now, he can't tell you what they are, but one day he may be able to. Until then, will you trust me and let Galen come back?"

Dureena looked away from Gideon to Galen, and then she turned to look up at Max, who looked down at her for a long moment, silently communicating with her before he looked up, his eyes clouded with suppressed hatred for Galen. Then he pointedly looked away from the Technomage to Gideon. "I don't know if that's possible this time. Some betrayals, even if for a good reason, can't be forgiven."

Gideon sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. He'd thought less than an hour ago that maybe, just maybe, things would be all right. But it was beginning to look as if the rift between his friends could never be mended. Everyone was directing their anger and hatred at someone other than the two people who had caused this. Lucas... and himself.

"I can understand that, Max. But the truth is that Lucas forced Galen to take him and Angel away." Gideon paused and moved away from them, to stand by the sofa. When he turned he saw John, who had remained silent and watchful, give him a small smile of encouragement, showing him without words that he was there, supporting him. Gideon gave him a tired smile before he continued.

"Hasn't Lucas done enough damage to us all? Let's try and move beyond that and not let him hurt us anymore." He started to pace as he spoke, not really looking at the others, but hoping that they would at least hear him out.

"Galen once said that we were his family. Like many families, we would squabble amongst ourselves, but when an outsider attacked us, we'd unite to defend each other. Galen has at one time or another saved the life of everyone in this room. Mine more than once. But somehow Lucas has managed to pry us apart. He's done things to us that have hurt more than anything any of us have felt before. And we've let him do it." He stopped and looked round at Max and Dureena.

"Can we stop this? Can we try to accept that each of us has our reasons for what we've done? God knows, if I can't get Deborah to accept my reasons for having Angel charged, then you people will be the only family I have left. Don't let Lucas destroy that."

Gideon watched as tears ran down Dureena's face and she flung herself at him, but this time she hugged him hard and leaned her face into his shoulder. He held her tight against him and spoke softly. "I'm so sorry, Dureena. Everything that's happened to all of us is my fault. If I hadn't carried that damned Box around, none of these terrible things would have happened. If you have to hate and blame someone, let it be me."

He looked over Dureena's head to where Max stood silently watching them. "Please, Max. Can we at least try to make this work again?" He watched as Max walked towards him and took Dureena from his arms.

Max turned Dureena to face him and lifted her chin with his hand. He looked down at her and wiped the tears from her face. "It's up to you, Dureena. Can you live with this? Can you be part of a team with Galen again? Can you try?"

Dureena sniffed loudly and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, before whispering hoarsely, "I can try," then burying her head in Max's chest.

Max looked over her head at Gideon then across to where Galen and John stood, silently watching. "That's about as good as it gets, Captain. We'll try."

"Where have you been, Matthew? I've been jamming the magnetic lock on the Judge's chambers for the last twenty minutes, but they're just taking the door off the hinges to let him out!" Galen hissed at Gideon as he ran down the corridor towards the courtroom.

"Got held up... Thanks... Everyone here?" Gideon panted as he slid to a halt by Galen's side, outside the door of the court.

"Yes, they've all been in there for the last half hour. If I hadn't locked the Judge in his office, it would have all been over by now. What delayed you?" Galen was standing, hands on hips, looking completely exasperated with Gideon.

Gideon was recovering his breath, but didn't want to go through it all at that moment, so pushed Galen towards the door. "Later. Let's get in there and see what we can do for Angel."

Gideon silently cursed the bureaucratic snarl up that had delayed him. He'd just been leaving the hotel room with Galen, when his Supplies Officer from the Excalibur had called him about a problem she was having. She'd explained the difficulties and almost begged him to intervene with Earthforce HQ on Mars. They weren't listening to her, maybe they'd listen to him, but the Captain had to call *immediately* or the Earthforce Quartermaster's Office would close for the night and they needed to get the problem sorted out before tomorrow.

Gideon had sighed and sent Galen on ahead with instructions to do whatever was necessary to delay the start of the hearing until Gideon could get there. He'd then spent the next hour trying to explain to the Quartermaster's Office that it didn't matter how much specially aged Spoo they sent him, he had no use for it.

It hadn't helped when he'd got sarcastic with them. "Forget the aged Spoo. You may have noticed that relations between the Interstellar Alliance and the Centauri Republic have been a little strained recently. As the Centauri is the only race in the galaxy that like their Spoo almost rotten, I don't have a lot of use for it on my ship. I hadn't been planning on taking any Centauri on the crew, so unless you want me to deliver it personally to the Emperor's palace on Centauri Prime, you'd better keep it here and... never mind, I'm sure you'll find a place to put it."

The argument had gone on far longer than it should have, and Gideon had been nearly screaming with frustration as the time slipped past. When he'd finally got the Quartermaster's agreement to deliver what he needed, in the quantity he wanted, he'd left the hotel room at a run, arriving at the courthouse hot and breathing heavily. Gideon smiled bitterly to himself as he thought how much Deborah had used to like it when he did that.

He pushed the door open and strode through, with Galen following closely on his heels. Heads turned as they entered and Gideon saw that John and Lily were sitting together on the right of the courtroom, directly behind the railing, on the other side of which sat Magnusson, Angel and Deborah. Max, Ilas and Dureena sat directly behind John and Lily and all five turned to look, John giving Gideon a relieved smile as he and Galen strode down the aisle to take the seats his XO and Lily had left vacant beside them.

On the left side of the court, Lieutenant Carr and two other security officers sat in a line behind the railing. One woman sat alone in front of them. Gideon assumed this to be the Prosecutor. While Carr and her companions turned to stare at him and Galen as they entered the room, no one in front of the railings had moved.

Gideon sat immediately behind Deborah and stared at her back, willing her to turn and look at him or at least to pick up his feelings. She was dressed in a simple black sleeveless dress, showing the narrowing of her waist and swell of her hips as she sat, without it hugging her figure. Her hair was pulled back severely into a tight braid that hung down her back. From where Gideon sat, he could easily have touched her hair; his hand started to reach out to her, almost of its own accord. He pulled it back quickly and concentrated on projecting all his love for her as strongly as he could, in the hope that she would read him. If she did, she wasn't showing it. Deborah's back remained rigid and unbending before him.

Gideon sighed heavily as the Judge entered the courtroom, and they all stood. The delay had meant that he'd missed the chance to try to explain to Deborah why he'd had to do what he'd done to Angel. Maybe he'd get a better chance afterwards.

As Angel stood, Gideon noticed her for the first time. He could only see her back, but her appearance

was significantly improved since he'd last seen her. Her back was painfully thin through the tailored jacket she wore, and he saw that her hair had been cut to remove the knots that had been there. It didn't have the same lustrous shine it had before, but at least it was clean and neat. A wave of guilt swept through Gideon again as he saw what his actions had done to the poor girl.

He glanced sideways at Galen to see how he was taking his first sight of Angel in nine months. Galen's eyes never moved from Angel's back, and Gideon could see the shock and pain Galen felt at seeing Angel so reduced. Then as he became aware of Gideon's scrutiny, Galen schooled his features until they showed nothing. Gideon faced the front again as the judge called the court to order.

Demon rose to her feet as the Judge entered the courtroom, using everything that John had taught her to block out the feelings of those around her. She'd returned to the hotel earlier in the afternoon and left Marcus with Luke. Changing quickly, she'd gone back to the Security Station to help Angel dress, and wait for Magnusson to collect them and take them to court. Demon had hoped that with the loss of their link she would be able to impose calm on her sister, as she could with others, but even now she was unable to directly influence Angel's feelings. She'd still done her best to project calm and confidence at her sister, in an attempt to soothe the anxiety that Angel so clearly displayed.

Angel had been shaking so badly that she'd been unable to button her shirt, and her fear of what was to come was clearly visible in her every expression. Demon had quietly taken her sister's hands and held them between her own for a moment, putting everything she had into projecting her love and caring. Angel had gradually stopped shaking, but Demon had done up the shirt buttons, her bruised right hand still a little awkward, then helped Angel into the jacket and skirt that Magnusson had brought for her.

She'd watched in silence as Angel touched up her make up and brushed her hair, hands steady enough at last to attempt those tasks. They'd then sat quietly, hardly exchanging a word as they'd waited for Magnusson, Angel holding Demon's left hand so tightly that Demon had wondered if it would end up as bruised as her right. She hadn't cared if it did, nothing would have made her loose her hold on her sister at that point.

When Magnusson arrived, he'd spent a short time briefing them on what to expect when they arrived in the court and how to behave. He'd told them that he wasn't expecting any great surprises; just the detailing of the charges against Angel and Lucas Buck, then an adjournment for forty-eight hours while both Prosecution and Defense prepared their cases. He'd warned Angel that the Judge might ask her some questions, and that it was important that she answered clearly and unequivocally that she had not known that Dureena's baby would die when Lucas was brought back. Angel had nodded, and Demon knew that this much at least Angel could do. No matter how guilty she felt about the loss of Dureena's child, she could state truthfully that she had been entirely unaware of that consequence.

Demon had tried to get Magnusson to tell her what arrangements Matthew had made for paying his fees, but couldn't get an answer. Magnusson had just repeated that he and Gideon had an arrangement, and that was all she needed to know. This hadn't helped Demon's confusion on this point. Why would Matthew want to help get Angel acquitted after raising the charges against her in the first place? Magnusson had refused to answer that question, telling her that no doubt Gideon had his reasons and perhaps it would be better for her if she didn't know what they were.

Magnusson had called for a guard to take them to the courtroom and protested vehemently when they'd attempted to put wrist restraints on Angel. Demon had held Angel tightly while he'd argued that she was still only a suspect with no criminal record and such treatment was unnecessary. The Security Officer had reluctantly conceded the point, and then escorted them through the corridors connecting the

Security Station to the court, holding Angel's arm in lieu of the handcuffs.

As soon as they entered the courtroom, Ilas and Lily had rushed forward to the rail behind which they had to stay. Angel had wrenched herself loose from the Security Officer's grasp and flung herself across the room into her sisters' arms. Demon had watched the reunion with tears sliding down her otherwise impassive face. She had locked down on every emotion she was feeling, all too aware that Magnusson was watching her closely. She'd looked around the courtroom and seen that John was waiting quietly behind Lily, ready to take her into his arms and comfort her, when she needed him. Max and Dureena had stood in the second row of seats, watching Ilas as she'd hugged Angel and told her how much they'd all missed her. Neither of their faces showed any more expression than Demon's and for a moment Demon had wondered exactly what evidence they would give. Had Dureena finally accepted Angel's innocence?

Demon had felt a wave of pain almost overwhelm her as she'd realized that Matthew wasn't present. She'd been hoping that he'd be waiting for her, and perhaps they'd have a moment together before the trial started. She desperately wanted to apologize for her loss of control when she'd hit him and hoped that he might forgive her. But Matthew hadn't been there. He obviously couldn't bear to see her for any longer than he had to and was doing whatever he could to avoid her. Demon had clamped down on her feelings, determined that no one should know the depth of her pain.

When Ilas, Lily and Angel had finally disentangled themselves from each other, all three were weeping openly with the emotion of the moment. A bailiff had called them to order and tried to open the door at the side of the court to allow the Judge to enter, but the door had stuck fast. They'd all waited with increasing anxiety as repeated attempts at unjamming the door had failed. Finally, workmen had been called and gone to work on the hinges and started to remove the door.

When they'd nearly completed their task, Demon had heard the door at the back of the courtroom open and was on the point of turning to see who was arriving so late when she'd become aware of a presence she hadn't felt in months. Holding herself rigid as she'd sensed Galen entering the room, she fought to suppress the anger that always swept through her when he was near. The anger had grown as she'd realized that Matthew had entered the court alongside Galen. How could he stand to be with the man who had hurt her and her sisters so badly? Demon was sure then that she had lost her husband, as that had been the final proof that Matthew no longer cared for her. Matthew would never have brought the Technomage with him if he still had any feelings for her at all.

Pain, grief and anger had fought against each other within her, perilously close to bursting out her control, but Demon had refused to allow anyone else to know what she was feeling. Her feelings were unimportant at this point, what mattered was Angel. She'd used every bit of control she possessed and held her feelings in check, at the same time blocking out everything around her.

Demon saw the Judge sit behind his desk, and the bailiff told them all to sit, then turned to watch, as the Prosecutor stood to read the charges.

Gideon stood behind Deborah, unable to prevent himself noticing how her dress followed the curves of her body, stopping a few centimeters above her knees, long enough to be modest, but short enough to show her long legs off to advantage. He closed his eyes momentarily, trying to suppress the pain that the thought of never being able to touch her again produced. Deborah held her arms loosely by her sides, and he couldn't help but focus on her left hand, once more bare of any jewelry. Gideon put his right hand into his pocket and touched the two rings he'd kept with him every moment since he'd

found them, wondering if he'd ever be able to persuade her to wear them again, fearing that he wouldn't, that she'd never forgive him.

He sat with the others and dragged his attention to the Prosecutor as she stood to detail the charges. Her opening words left him open mouthed in amazement.

"As Prosecutor in the case of the People of Mars versus Angelique Denier I would like to start by requesting that the original charge of accessory to murder made against Ms. Denier, and the charge of murder against one Lucas Buck, not here present today, be dropped and expunged from the court records."

The silence that followed these words was almost tangible, eventually broken by Max's clear whisper to Dureena, "Hold on, don't lose it now. Wait until we find out what's going on here." Good advice. Gideon wondered if Dureena would be able to follow it. He glanced sideways to see that Galen was staring at him, a puzzled expression on his face. All Gideon could do was shrug and nod towards the Judge, waiting for him to speak.

The Judge spoke. "This is most unusual. Could you explain why you wish these charges to be dropped?"

The Prosecutor explained that she had examined all the information provided by Mars Security and was unable to find evidence that any crime had been committed. Gideon could almost feel Dureena's temper rising from where he sat. He glanced across at Carr, trying to figure out what was going on. Carr looked back at him, a smug smile on her face, which puzzled him even more.

The Prosecutor gave a brief summary of the circumstances of the death of Dureena's child, then went on, "It has been suggested that the death of the child was in some way related to the 'revival' of the aforementioned Lucas Buck, but we have no record of such a person existing, and we have been unable to find any reasonable explanation for how these two events could be related. It is not disputed that the child died in uterus, but there is no evidence that this death was by anything other than natural causes."

She straightened her back and increased the volume of her voice slightly as she continued, "I therefore request the court to delete and remove the charges from the record. Angelique Denier and Lucas Buck, if such a person exists, cannot be held responsible for the death of an unborn child by natural causes."

Dureena started to shriek, and Gideon could hear John and Lily trying to comfort her. He turned to see that Max and Ilas were both sitting motionless, apparently in shock. Gideon dragged his attention back to the Judge just in time to hear him say, "In the circumstances, I can only agree with you. The charges made against Angelique Denier and Lucas Buck, of accessory to murder and murder respectively, are hereby removed from the court record. No such crimes have taken place."

When Angel had first entered the court, her courage had almost failed her. The first face she'd seen was Dureena's. Her sense of guilt for the death of Dureena's child had almost overwhelmed her, and her knees had gone weak. She'd half stumbled, but Magnusson's strong hand under one arm had held her up, while the Security Officer's grip on the other arm kept her in place. Then she'd seen Ilas and Lily, and all fear and guilt had fled in her need to be with them again. Angel had torn herself away from the hands holding her and flung herself across the court, throwing her arms around her sisters as they did the same to her. The next few moments had been a blur as they'd told her how much

they'd missed her, crying, hugging, telling her that they loved her, then crying again.

At first Angel hadn't been able to believe that they'd forgiven her for all the awful things that had happened. She'd wept in their arms as they'd told her over and over how much they loved her and wanted her back. Eventually, she'd calmed and they'd dried each other's tears. She'd even been able to manage a half smile over Lily's shoulder at John as he stood waiting. John had smiled back gently, and nodded at Angel, making it clear that he'd forgiven her for everything that had happened to him on his first visit to Eriadne. Angel had felt a wave of gratitude for his understanding and forgiveness and wondered how she could ever repay his kindness. Looking beyond him to Max and Dureena, she'd only been able to hope that one day they might also forgive her involuntary contribution to the death of their child.

Magnusson had whispered into her ear that she needed to let go of her sisters and take her seat, and she'd reluctantly obeyed after one last hug. She'd gone to sit quietly between Magnusson and Demon, noticing for the first time that Demon was holding herself rigidly under control, her face an impassive mask. For a moment, Angel had wondered why her sister was reacting in that way, then she'd realized. Gideon wasn't there. She'd reached out to touch Demon's left hand, trying to give back some of the love and reassurance that Demon had so generously lavished on her in the last day or so. It was only then that Angel had noticed that Demon's hand was bare. She'd wondered what had happened to the ring she'd seen Gideon place on that hand in the chapel the day before.

Before she could ask, the bailiff had called for them to stand for the entrance of the Judge. All Angel's fears had come flooding back in that moment. What if Demon and Magnusson were wrong? What if they couldn't get her acquitted? Did she deserve to be acquitted anyway? Dureena's child had died as a direct result of her actions, even if she hadn't known what would happen. But if she were found guilty then she'd be mind wiped. All coherent thought vanished under the onslaught of fear that swept through her at that prospect.

Angel had gradually become aware that there was some problem, that the Judge had not entered the court. She'd sat as still as she could, her head down, staring at her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she'd waited, every moment a torture as she'd desperately wanted it all to be over and done with.

After a long delay, she'd heard the door at the back of the court open and turned her head just enough to glimpse who had entered. Angel quickly looked back to the front, trying desperately to quell the wave of panic that hit her. Seeing the two men entering the room, Angel was thrown back to that moment in the docking bay on Babylon 5, when Galen had tried to drag her back onto his ship, and when she had thought that Lucas was going to let him. And now Galen and Lucas had come back to get her. Angel had started to shake violently, as she'd thought about what Lucas would do to her now he'd caught up with her. Mind wiping suddenly didn't seem so bad when compared to that.

She'd felt Demon's hand close over hers and brought herself back to the present. She wasn't on B5, she was on Mars. Demon was sitting next to her, holding her hand tightly, something that couldn't happen if Lucas were nearby. Angel had turned her head again, just far enough to watch from the corner of her eye as the two men sat in the row immediately behind her. Then she knew. It wasn't Lucas at all, it was Gideon who now sat behind her, staring at Demon, his face showing how much he loved her. She'd watched as his hand moved to reach out and touch Demon's back, then she saw him withdraw it again, his expression changing to one of pain and loss. At that moment, Angel had almost been able to forgive him for everything he'd done to her, when she saw just how much he loved and missed her sister.

Then she'd noticed Galen watching her, his face a marked contrast to Gideon's, a mask showing

nothing. But she'd been able to see his piercing blue eyes staring at her, burning with the passion he still felt for her. Angel had shuddered in disgust at the thought of him, at the memory of his hands touching her, his lips kissing her. She'd felt physically sick at the memories that engulfed her and had been grateful for the distraction that the Judge's delayed entrance brought.

Angel had listened in confusion as the Prosecutor had asked for the charges against her to be dropped, unable to take in the fact that she would soon be free. Her hopes had mounted as the Judge had asked the Prosecutor to explain, but her relief was short lived. First, she heard Dureena's screams of anguish as the death of her child was ruled to be by natural causes. A wave of guilt swept over her, as she knew that the Prosecutor was wrong. The baby had been murdered, and the crime should be acknowledged. Then the guilt was replaced by fear as she heard the Judge's final words. Lucas had also been cleared of committing any crime. He was now a free man, free to pursue his revenge on her at any time he wanted.

Gideon rushed to Dureena. She was shrieking her pain and anger at the top of her voice, screaming that the judge was corrupt, that the court system on Mars was inept, that Mars Security were useless and on and on, listing every flaw and defect she could find to insult the court. Gideon grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, trying to quiet her. John stood next to him, his hand on Dureena's arm and Gideon could feel the waves of calm and reassurance that John was trying to project at Dureena. But she was having none of it. She was totally out of control, and Gideon could only sympathize. To have her child's death dismissed as due to natural causes, when they all knew he had been murdered, was the ultimate insult.

Gideon didn't know what to say to calm Dureena down. She had every right to be angry. For a moment, he wondered what Max and Ilas were doing and glanced over at them. Max sat staring into space, his face a mask, showing nothing but shock. Ilas had her head buried in Lily's shoulder and was sobbing bitterly.

In the background, he could hear the Judge calling for order, banging on his table with increasing irritation at the disruption in his court. Gideon and John continued to try to calm Dureena, but she wasn't cooperating. All her grief and anger had burst out of her, and she was totally out of control.

Finally, a bailiff appeared at Gideon's side and grabbed Dureena's arm. Gideon tried to warn him, but he wouldn't listen. The bailiff started to drag Dureena out of the court, and before he knew it, he was pinned against the wall with her knife at his throat. Gideon tried to pull her off and John was doing the same from the other side, but her anger was fueling her strength and she wouldn't move. All the time her screaming and shrieking continued, and the Judge was getting more and more angry.

Gideon and John eventually managed to pull Dureena back from the bailiff, then Max appeared, taking Dureena into his arms. She started to quiet as he pulled her to him and stroked her hair, all the time looking over her head at Gideon.

Max spoke softly. "You made us a promise, Captain. Is this the end of it?"

Gideon shook his head. "No. I promised you that the people responsible for the death of your child would be brought to justice. This travesty isn't justice. This isn't over Max. I'll keep after Lucas Buck for the rest of my life, if necessary, but one day he'll pay. I made that promise nine months ago on Eriadne, and I make it again now."

Max nodded and held Dureena close. The bailiff, rubbing his neck where Dureena had held him, came forward.

"She has to leave. If she stays, she'll be held in contempt and jailed. Get her out of here."

Max nodded and whispered to Dureena. Gideon heard movement behind him and saw Ilas and Lily join them. Ilas moved to Dureena's side and helped Max take her from the court. As the door closed behind them, silence descended.

Gideon turned back to face the front of the court and saw that the Judge was staring at him. "I heard that comment, Captain Gideon. And yes, I know who you are. But I will not have my court described as a travesty. One more comment like that, and I'll hold *you* in contempt and have you ejected from my court. Is that clear?"

Gideon gritted his teeth and nodded, returning to his seat with Lily and John beside him. He realized that Galen hadn't moved during the previous few minutes. He had stayed in his seat, still staring at Angel. Magnusson, Deborah and Angel had all turned to watch the events unfolding behind them, but none of them had moved from their seats.

For the first time that day, Gideon saw Deborah's face. It was a frozen mask, showing nothing, completely unreadable. He hated that expression, as he knew that it meant she had locked herself under control, unwilling to allow herself to feel whatever emotion was trying to break through. He wondered for a moment what that emotion was. Anger? Pain? Loss? He feared it was probably the former and could only hope for the latter. He tried to catch her eye, but she carefully avoided looking at him and turned back in her seat without acknowledging his presence. Gideon would never have guessed that something so simple as that movement could hurt so much. She couldn't even bear to look at him. He nearly lost all hope of reconciliation at that moment.

Suppressing the pain that threatened to overwhelm him, Gideon forced himself to pay attention to the proceedings, wondering what would happen next. Would Angel be freed immediately? He watched as the Judge turned back to the Prosecutor. "Is there any reason for us to detain this young lady further? As all charges have been dropped, I can see no reason to keep her in custody."

The Prosecutor stood quickly. "There are some additional charges that we would like to raise at this point."

Gideon's stomach turned. [What the hell is going on here? What additional charges?] He looked across at Carr and again met that smug smile. She was up to something, but what? He heard Magnusson start to protest at the late notification of the charges, but the Judge quickly over ruled him.

The Prosecutor continued, "While investigating the original charges, it was found that the identification papers used by Ms. Denier to enter Mars were forgeries. We have been unable to trace any record of anyone with that name on either Earth or Mars, although our investigations continue into the records of other Earth colonies and Earth Alliance member planets. While those investigations proceed, we would like Ms. Denier to be held on charges of using forged identity papers to enter Mars, possession of forged identity papers, and failing to register correctly with Mars authorities."

Gideon froze. The issue of Angel's identity papers had never occurred to him. If anything, he'd assumed that she had papers from when she was on B5. But of course Lucas would have had to use false papers. Why hadn't he thought of that? Now the delicate fabric of falsehood he'd woven, to acquire identities for Deborah, Lily and Ilas, was threatened. He'd told Carr that Deborah was Angel's sister.

All Carr had to do was start digging into Deborah's identity and she'd soon find that there was no record of such a sister. Gideon would need to do something quickly, to get Angel's records added to the passenger list of the Heinlein, and to contact the village elders on Eriadne to change their story. He promised himself that as soon as the hearing was over, he'd get onto the job.

Gideon pulled his attention back to the courtroom in time to hear the Judge agree to hold Angel for another forty-eight hours. He tried to tell himself that this was what they'd expected anyway and that the issue of the false identity papers was a minor one, which could be resolved with a fine at worst. Then the Judge continued, "Are there any other charges against Ms. Denier? Or whatever her true name is?"

The Prosecutor cleared her throat. "Yes, Your Honor. One further charge. Angelique Denier is charged with the murder of the Brakiri known as Karlven on 22nd June 2269, at the Mons Olympus Bar on Burroughs Street."

Gideon snapped his head round to stare at Carr. The smug smile had turned into a broad malicious grin. He turned back to stare at the Prosecutor as she continued, feeling as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him. [What the hell is going on here?]

"At 7.15 p.m. on the 22nd of June, a Brakiri known as Karlven was stabbed to death outside the said premises. Investigation has revealed that this Brakiri entered Marsport with Ms. Denier, on 7th May, also using false identity papers. The two of them cohabited an apartment on Bradbury Place from that date until the date of the murder. We have two eyewitnesses who will give evidence of having seen Ms. Denier stab and kill the Brakiri known as Karlven, at the aforementioned time and place. We also have the evidence of the owner of the bar that the last word spoken by the Brakiri was the name of the accused. Full evidence, including statements by the witnesses, can be made available for the court's assessment at this time, if required."

Gideon couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could this have happened? The Brakiri they were talking about had to be Nikarran, but how had he been killed? Who had murdered him? He was damn sure that it wasn't Angel, but who were the eyewitnesses and why would they say she'd done it? He was only half listening as the Judge agreed to consider the evidence, and Magnusson started to protest. But before he could formulate his objection, Angel started to scream. She leaped to her feet and tried to push past Magnusson to get out. Gideon had no idea where she thought she was going, but watched as Magnusson held her in place.

Angel was screaming over and over that she didn't do it, "Demon you have to believe me I didn't do this I would never do that he was my only friend he saved me he looked after me I needed him and he left me but he couldn't help it he was taken away from me please don't look like that I didn't do it, please..." Her words became incoherent in the face of Deborah's lack of response.

Gideon watched helplessly as his wife slowly stood, first supporting herself on the table in front of her, then turning to face her sister. Deborah's eyes were glazed and unfocussed. She was obviously deep in shock, but still she held out her arms to Angel. He watched as she took Angel into her arms, while her lips formed a single word, but made no sound. "Nikarran."

Demon was finding it increasingly hard to breathe. For some reason, every breath seemed not to give her enough air, but the faster she breathed the worse it got. She had listened to the charges brought against her sister, unable to understand what was happening. Who were they talking about? How

could they believe that Angel had killed anyone? Then the truth gradually started to dawn on her. It was Nikarran they were talking about. Nikarran, her friend, the person she had begged to look after her sister, the man who had left his home and his family at her request. Now he was dead on a planet far from home, never able to see his daughter and grandchildren again. And it was her fault; if she hadn't asked him to go with Angel, he would still be on Eriadne, with his family and friends, a long and prosperous life ahead of him. Instead, he was now an unidentified corpse on Mars.

She froze in place as she remembered how she'd cursed him when they first found Angel. *"I trusted Nikarran to take care of her. Where is he? Did he steal the jewelry we gave them and abandon her? ... I should have done anything other than trust that bastard! If I ever find him I'll kill him!"* Demon felt sick at the memory. How could she have doubted her friend? How could she have ever believed that anything short of death would have kept him from keeping his promise to her? She should have known that something terrible had happened to him. Only that would have taken him away from what he saw as his duty, caring for Angel.

Her disgust for herself and self-hatred almost overwhelmed her as she sat, barely hearing the sound of Angel's voice. But gradually the tone of that voice, the pleading and the pain, broke through her shock. Demon looked up to see Angel, struggling in Magnusson's arms, begging her to listen, to forgive her, to believe her.

Demon slowly pushed herself to her feet, wondering why her legs seemed not to want to hold her up. She leaned for a moment on the table in front of her, then straightened and held her arms out to Angel. Magnusson released his hold and Angel threw herself into Demon's arms. Demon was still unable to speak, but held Angel tightly as she cried.

She half heard Magnusson starting to protest to the Judge, claiming that the lack of notice of the new charges had prejudiced the defense of his client. He ran through a whole series of technical points, but the Judge over-ruled them all.

While Magnusson was talking, Demon realized that Matthew was leaning over the railing trying to get to... to who? To her? To Angel? She didn't know. He was speaking but his words didn't seem to make sense. She could see that the court bailiff was holding him back, while Galen stood on his other side, also holding his arm.

Lily was also trying to get to Demon and Angel, but John was holding her, trying to calm and soothe her. Everybody was talking, yelling, screaming and Demon could no longer make sense of any of it. She only knew two things. Angel was in pain and needed her, and her friend was dead. Nothing else mattered.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Cauldron Bubble

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