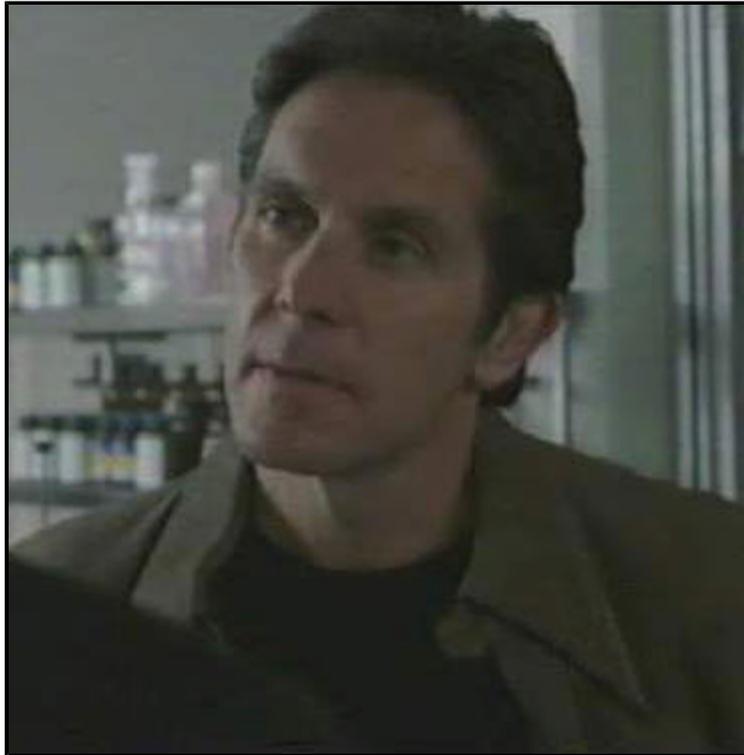


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four U - Part 2: Punishment

by The Space Witches



Things are not well... at all.

Chapter 1

28th November 2273

The upper edge of the sun was just peeking over the horizon as Angel climbed behind the steering wheel of her runabout and turned on the nearly silent engine. She smiled, telling herself for the thousandth time that 23rd century vehicles were much less fun than the ones she'd known in the 20th and 21st centuries. There was no roar of the engine now, no excitement, no screeching of tires against tarmac as she pulled silently away from the beach house where she still lived with her sister and brother-in-law.

Angel could have bought a place of her own, but she'd been unable to find anything as nice as the home she shared with Demon and Matthew, and Angel admitted privately to herself that she wasn't quite ready to live alone. The thought of coming home to a silent house, eating alone, and sleeping alone, were all things that Angel couldn't face as yet. Not that she hadn't had more than her fair share of offers for company in her bed.

Negotiating the road up into the hills where she was working on location that day, Angel

shook her head sadly. The days when she was willing to seek solace and comfort in a man's arms and bed were long gone. Her experiences during the years she had spent on board the Excalibur had made her wary of trusting any man with her body or her heart. She had learned that she could be badly hurt, physically and emotionally, by allowing anyone too close. Now she kept her distance, friendly but remote, imitating the cool, aloof demeanor she had watched Demon use to successfully repel unwanted advances over the years. The only people she allowed herself to love were her family.

There were times when Angel was lonely, despite the new friends she had made in the movie industry, and despite being able to go home to a warm and welcoming environment each night. It was hard sometimes not to feel jealous of the closeness and devotion that existed between Demon and Matthew. Demon's pregnancy was progressing well, and every day she looked more beautiful, her face lit by an inner glow of contentment and happiness. Matthew doted on his wife, his love for her and his excitement at the prospect of their second child apparent in every look he gave Demon. Angel told herself sternly that this was what she had wanted when she had sent Matthew back to Demon a year before. It had all worked out for the best.

Pushing aside the almost unconscious longing for a child of her own, Angel pulled into the parking lot of the hotel they were using that day for filming a poolside scene. Mentally running through her lines and the scene she was about to shoot, Angel felt her exhilaration growing. The part she was playing was small, but key to the movie. The script was good, and while the budget for the movie wasn't large, both Angel and her agent were convinced that it could turn into a real box office success. Some of the earlier scenes had already been screened for distributors, and the feedback had been positive.

Even more exciting was the meeting her agent, Peter Williams, had called for that day. He'd arranged for her to leave the set mid-morning, as he wanted to talk about another role for which he'd set up an audition. He hadn't told Angel what it was, but she knew from his tone of voice that he was excited, so it must be something big. The director of her current movie had been accommodating, so Angel knew she only had a couple of hours work ahead before she could leave for her meeting with Peter. With any luck she might be able to surprise Demon by joining her for an early lunch at home.

Angel smiled again as she waved at her colleagues who were already on set. Life was good and seemed to be getting better.

Gideon awoke at the sound of the front door closing. Angel always left quietly, but long years of Earthforce training brought the retired Captain awake at the softest of noises. Rolling onto his side, he looked down at his sleeping wife and smiled. [Well, any noise except Deborah's snoring. I've learned to sleep through that, at least.]

Deborah slept in her usual untidy sprawl, arms and long legs flung wide, her mass of blonde curls cascading across the pillows. She slept on her back these days, the bulge of her belly making her less comfortable on her front. Gideon reached out and gently ran his hand over the bump. Her swollen belly wasn't very noticeable when she was dressed, but naked in bed next to him, Deborah's pregnancy was obvious.

Resting his hand on the bump, Gideon felt his daughter move under his hand. Just a gentle

morning 'hello' kick for her Daddy. He smiled and whispered, "Hello, pumpkin," to his little girl. At that moment, he couldn't have said which female entranced him more: his wife or his daughter.

Deborah's golden brown eyes opened and she smiled up at him lazily, saying softly, "Good morning. Are you and Mattie having a nice chat?"

Gideon smiled back, and leaned across to kiss his wife, whispering, "Good morning," in return. He went on more loudly, "I was just going to wish my daughter a happy anniversary." Deborah looked up at him quizzically. "She's twenty-two weeks old today. One of the advantages of knowing exactly when she was conceived is that we also know exactly how old she is. I'll start counting again when she's born, but for now, she's my twenty-two week old baby girl." Gideon leaned forward and kissed Deborah's belly, whispering, "Happy twenty-two week Anniversary, Mattie."

He felt Deborah stroke his hair, and he started to kiss his way up her belly, arriving at her breasts, heavier now, but still the part of Deborah's body that drew his hands, his eyes and his mouth like a magnet. During the first weeks of her pregnancy, Deborah's breasts had been sore and tender, and Gideon hadn't allowed himself to touch them. It had been torture for him to sleep next to Deborah, to see her breasts, but not to fondle or kiss them. He'd been a very relieved man when the discomfort had passed.

Taking his wife's nipple into his mouth, Gideon licked it softly, hearing Deborah moan as it stiffened under his touch. It wasn't the only thing that was stiffening. [Nothing better than getting up early in the morning,] he thought, then focused all his attention on giving and taking as much pleasure as he knew how.

Some time later, completely sated, Gideon rolled onto his back, pulling Deborah against his side as he sighed deeply. "I miss your sendings. It's the only bad thing about you being pregnant, the fact that I can't feel you come." He felt Deborah tense as he held her, and he rushed to reassure her. "Making love to you is still the most wonderful thing I've ever done, but I do miss your sendings." He kissed her forehead, and she looked up, smiling.

"I know what you mean. I miss being able to tell what people are feeling. But I'm not sure it's the *only* bad thing about being pregnant. Personally, I'd count sore tits, back ache, swollen ankles, indigestion and nausea as pretty bad things, but I guess *you* don't have to suffer them." Deborah thumped her husband's arm gently, and grinned to show him she was teasing.

Gideon smiled and kissed her gently. "I'd share them if I could, but..."

Deborah interrupted him before he could finish, "...but you're actually rather glad you *can't* share them, is that it?"

Gideon tried to deny it, but Deborah knew when he was lying, even though her empathic powers were suppressed during her pregnancy. He stopped her teasing in the only really effective way he knew. He kissed her, closing her mouth with his. After a few minutes he broke the kiss and rolled onto his back again, feeling Deborah snuggle against his side, twining one of her legs through his and draping her arm across his chest.

They lay in contented silence for a while, then Gideon sighed. "I'd better get moving. Marcus

will be up and around any time now, and I promised his playschool teacher I'd help out today. Why don't you stay in bed and go back to sleep? You can have a lazy morning, then do some writing while you have the place to yourself."

Demon gave a lazy, "Mmm," and shuffled as close as her belly would allow, before saying softly, "But you don't have to get up just yet, do you? This is nice."

Gideon hugged her in silent agreement. This was nice. Very nice. He was still searching for something to do with his life in retirement, but for the moment, he was content to be a husband and father. He loved his life in the beach house, spending long, lazy days with his wife and son. He and Marcus would play on the beach in the mornings while Deborah wrote, then they would join her for lunch before all going out together in the afternoons. In the evenings, Angel would join them for dinner, and they'd sit out on the deck in the balmy Californian darkness, sipping wine, talking and laughing, discussing the progress being made on their house in England.

The builders had been working there since the summer, and Gideon had made frequent visits to supervise and check on progress. Finally, it was all coming together, and the fully restored 19th century house overlooking the sea would be ready for them to move into in the New Year. Angel would stay on in the beach house when she was working, but she also knew she had a home with her sister and brother-in-law in England, any time she wanted it.

The only small cloud on Gideon's horizon was exactly what he would do with himself when the building work was completed and they had moved to England. He pushed that thought aside, telling himself that soon after they moved the baby would arrive, and then he'd certainly have plenty to do.

He also told himself that his concerns were less important than the well-being and safety of his family. The Excalibur may have been the strongest ship in the ISA fleet, but she had still been badly damaged in battle on more than one occasion. The risk of Deborah or Marcus being hurt in such an attack had become more than he could bear, especially once he and his wife had decided to have another child. Whatever worries Gideon might have about the future mattered little to him by comparison with the safety of his wife and children.

A thump on the door was enough warning for Gideon to grab the sheet and pull it up to cover himself and Deborah, before the door opened slowly to reveal Marcus standing in the hallway, rubbing his eyes sleepily. He was dressed in his teddy bear patterned pajamas, and he held Half-Ted by the foot, dangling from one hand.

Marcus looked up at his parents and yawned mightily. "What's for breakfast? Half-Ted is hungry."

Gideon laughed. "Go and get washed, and brush your teeth. I'll be through in a minute and I'll get you breakfast. Mommy is staying in bed late today."

Marcus had turned to leave when Deborah called out, "Don't I get a morning kiss?"

Marcus turned back and smiled, then ran across the room, dragging Half-Ted along behind him, the bear's earless head bumping along the floor as he ran. The little boy threw his arms around his mother's neck, and Gideon pulled his head back quickly, as Half-Ted came

perilously close to whacking him on the nose.

Marcus gave his mother a loud and slobbery kiss. "Morning, Mummy!" Then he ran from the room, still dragging his bear behind him.

Gideon laughed softly, and leaned over to wipe his wife's cheek with the corner of the sheet. "I hope his kisses get less sloppy as he gets older, or he's going to get a lot of complaints about his style from the ladies."

Deborah laughed softly, pulling Gideon down into one last kiss, whispering, "If he takes after his father, he'll get no complaints at all."

Demon opened her eyes and looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was after 10:30 and she knew she should get up soon, but she closed her eyes again, curling into a fetal position, pulling the pillow down under her head and thinking, [In a minute. I'll get up in a minute.]

As her pregnancy had progressed, Demon found she needed more sleep, and these occasional lazy days, when her family left her alone to sleep late, were welcome. With a sigh of contentment, Demon finally threw back the covers and walked into the bathroom, turning on the shower.

As she stood luxuriating in the flow of hot water, Demon wondered how she'd lived for so long without a water shower or a tub on board the Excalibur. She had certainly been making up for it since moving back to Earth. Matthew had complained that sometimes she spent so long soaking in the tub that she started to prune. Demon had soon fixed that complaint by dragging him into the tub with her, fully clothed. The memory of what had happened next was enough to raise the tall blonde's temperature several degrees.

As Demon rinsed her hair, she thought about the call she needed to make to her agent later that day. He'd been badgering her to make some personal appearances now her first book was climbing the best seller charts, but she had refused so far. She intended to call him to tell him firmly that she would do no book signings, interviews or appearances until after the baby was born. Demon had no intention of overtiring herself or doing anything that might jeopardize the baby's health.

Looking down fondly, Demon gently stroked her belly and smiled. She often chatted to Mattie when she was alone, and she had started to feel the bond developing between them, which would soon evolve into a link like the one she shared with Marcus. While Mattie wouldn't be sending words for a long time, Demon knew she would soon start picking up her baby's feelings, and she would be able to send love and reassurance to Mattie, even when she couldn't send to anyone else.

Stepping out of the shower, Demon towed herself dry, and then wrapped another towel around her hair. She walked through to the bedroom, and pulled a long, black cotton caftan from her wardrobe. Her waist had expanded to the point where she was no longer comfortable in pants, and when the days were warm, as November days in California often were, the loose, soft cotton of the caftan was the most comfortable thing for her to wear.

With one final rub at her hair with the towel, Demon left it to dry as it hung loose down her

back, and she walked downstairs to get herself a late breakfast. As she entered the kitchen, she glanced at the clock on the wall.

[11:30 already! I must get started on writing that next scene or the whole day will be gone before I know it.]

Galen sat with his eyes closed, his hood up and his hand extended before him. In his palm rested a control ball, shimmering with colors, yellow and green, that wrapped around each other, twining and writhing, as they battled for supremacy within the ball. The rest of the control room of the Technomage's ship was in darkness, and the glow given off by the struggling colors shed little light into the gloom.

A soft chime brought the Technomage's eyes open, but the battle inside the control ball continued as he ordered, "Ship, speak."

A female voice, soft and low, said quietly, "We are in geo-stationary orbit above the planet Earth, over the west coast of the North American continent, fully stealthed. Further instructions are required."

Galen sighed softly, then he said, "Hold position, and continue full stealth mode until further instructions are given. Range sensors and ensure target is isolated." He sometimes wondered why he tortured himself by having his ship use Isabelle's voice. Every time his ship spoke, he felt the pain of her loss again, but when he had changed the voice, he found he missed it so much, he had to bring it back.

Pushing aside such considerations, the Technomage focused on the control ball once more. It gave a visual representation of the battle in which he had been engaged for months. A battle he was finally close to winning.

Galen had been devastated by the discovery over a year before that the wife of his one-time best friend held part of the spirit of the great enemy. He had known that Demon--[So appropriately named!] he thought--and her sisters had been adapted and given their powers by the Vorlon, but the Technomage had been horrified to find that one of the foe still existed, albeit only in spirit, on this side of the galactic rim. He had decided at once that the enemy of his order must be destroyed. The only doubt in his mind had been how he should proceed.

Galen bitterly regretted the mistake he had made in consulting Alwyn. He had only sought the older Mage's advice on whether to proceed with the destruction alone, or whether to involve the council. Despite knowing Alwyn's fondness for humans--he had sired a child on one, and shared his life with her, after all--it had never occurred to Galen that Alwyn wouldn't totally agree with his decision to destroy the Vorlon.

Alwyn's reaction had stunned the younger Mage, and he had been deeply frustrated when he found that Alwyn had constructed a barrier of protective spells to guard Demon from Galen's attack.

Galen had brooded in angry frustration for months, unable to assail his prey as she was sheltered from him by the double protection of the Excalibur and Alwyn's spells. A secret approach and assault was impossible while she stayed on board ship. There were too many

people, too many sensors and too little privacy to ensure her complete destruction.

When Matthew Gideon had retired from Earthforce and taken his family to Earth, Galen had started to work on breaking through the protections Alwyn had put in place around Demon. Quietly, secretly, he had wormed his way around, under, over or through each layer of defense, until only one barrier remained. He had been forced to work slowly, not wanting to alert Alwyn to his progress in defeating the protective spells, but Galen now faced only one last hurdle. There was one final obstacle to ease aside, and then his prey would be at his mercy. He had come to Earth to complete the annihilation of his enemy.

Deep down inside the Mage, a flicker of doubt twitched at his conscience. Should he wait? Should he search longer for ways to destroy the Vorlon without killing the human host? From the little he had heard about Demon's reaction to finding she was hosting a Vorlon, she would welcome being freed from its thrall.

Galen shook his head. There was no way. He had used the months when Demon still lived on the Excalibur to research that possibility, running through the storehouse of knowledge maintained by the Technomage council in their hiding place. Unless the Vorlon left its host voluntarily, the only way to destroy it was to destroy the host first.

The Technomage let out a soft sigh. He regretted that his actions would leave Matthew Gideon without the wife he loved, but there was no alternative. 'Suffer not a witch to live.' The Biblical command was thousands of years old, and it had caused misery and death throughout the centuries, but it still held true. The witch must die.

Galen focused his attention back on the ball of control, the corners of his mouth twitching into a half-smile as he saw the green finally overwhelm the yellow. The last barrier was down, the last spell was broken. Now, finally, he could carry out the task he had waited for over a year to complete. He would kill Demon.

The ship's voice sounded in its soft, sweet tones. "Target is alone. Ready for attack."

The sound of the alarm startled Alwyn from a light doze, bringing him to full consciousness as he sat in the high-backed armchair in his ship's control room. He maintained the illusion of the armchair, the fireplace, the bookcases and the furniture which gave the room the impression of being an old fashioned library, but his ship was as advanced as any of the Technomage fleet. The voice of his ship now sounded softly in his ear, bringing a hiss of displeasure from Ishtar, as she dug her claws into Alwyn's shoulder.

"Protection alert. The defense barriers placed around Deborah Montgomery have been breached. The subject is now open to attack. Protection alert. The defense barriers..."

"Enough. I heard you the first time." Alwyn's fears made him short tempered. How had this happened? How had his spells been broken?

The Mage summoned a visualization of his spell, and the breach was immediately apparent. Ishtar hissed again as she nodded her head at the tiny tear in the fabric of space and time. A warp, which would allow someone with the right knowledge and skills to slip through the protective charm. The rip was so small it was barely discernible. Whoever had created the

breaching spell was skilled and strong. In fact, Alwyn knew of only one person who had the aptitude and the motivation to break his blockade.

[Galen. Why do you misuse your talents so? Is there not something constructive you can do? Does our order always have to destroy?] Alwyn sighed as the thoughts crossed his mind, but there was no time to dwell on Galen's misguided loyalty to the Technomage council and their orders. Demon was now at risk, and Alwyn needed to protect her.

"Ship. Locate Galen." That was the most important thing. Alwyn knew he must not allow Galen to get to Earth ahead of him.

The older Mage had been returning to Earth after taking Ishtar on a visit to see her baby, now growing well and under its father's guidance, developing the draconic skills necessary if it wished to bond itself to a Technomage in the future. Alwyn had been looking forward to his return to Earth, anticipating with pleasure the time he had then planned to spend with his partner, Sarah Chambers, and their son Jaysen, now a precocious two and a half years old. All such plans were now forgotten, until he could protect Demon from Galen's attack.

"Unable to locate Galen's ship. It appears to be in stealth mode."

Alwyn frowned. That was worrying. Why would Galen be trying to conceal himself and his ship? The older Mage knew that the alarm set off by the breaching of the barrier would not have been apparent to Galen. He would not yet know that Alwyn had detected his attack, so why would he hide?

There was only one reason Alwyn could think of. Galen was ready to attack *now*. He had somehow overcome all the other barriers Alwyn had put in place, without the older Mage detecting the breaches. And if that were the case...

Alwyn swore softly. "Ship. Engage over-drive and make top speed for Earth. Run engines at 10% above full load and take the shortest route. Navigate as far off the beacons as necessary. We have to arrive in Earth orbit in the shortest time possible."

Even over the inertia dampening system, Alwyn felt the surge forward, as his ship literally leaped to obey his instructions. He had now done everything he could to arrive on Earth to defend Demon as soon as he could. He just had to hope he would be soon enough.

But while he was waiting, he would prepare a few surprises for Galen.

Alwyn's brow lowered with anger when he thought about the younger man. He had tried again and again to guide Galen toward the right path, the path of light, but Galen had resisted, turning aside to the darkness at every opportunity. This was Elric's influence, the heritage the dead Mage had left behind. All the compassion and humanity that Galen had inherited from his parents had been overwhelmed by Elric's teachings.

Sometimes, Alwyn wondered what would have happened to Galen if Isabelle had lived. Would she have been able to save him? Could she have turned him to the light? Perhaps.

Alwyn sighed then closed his eyes, listening to his ship's estimation of the time it would take them to get to Earth. He was going as fast as he could and preparing for his arrival as best he knew how. There was nothing more he could do.

A sudden thought sent a shiver down Alwyn's spine. Did Galen know Demon was pregnant?

Demon stood in the doorway leading from the kitchen to the deck, staring out over the beach and the ocean, sipping her tea. The view never failed to fascinate her, the constantly shifting colors of sky, sand and sea providing endless contrasts of light and shade. The soft sound of the waves lapping against the shore was soothing, and it helped the tall blonde focus on how she wanted to approach the next scene she had to write. She knew what she wanted her characters to do, and where she needed to get them, but what was the best way to get them there?

She was barely aware of her hand resting on her belly, and her unconscious projection of calm and love to her baby, as she held her cup in her other hand and thought through her ideas.

A soft sound behind her made Demon turn, and she opened her eyes wide when she saw who stood in the doorway from the hall. Before her pregnancy she would have been able to detect the intruder's presence long before seeing him, by his emotions, but now her empathy was temporarily blinded by her condition.

"Galen? What a nice surprise. Why didn't you let us know you were coming?" She didn't bother to ask how he had gotten into the house. Galen was a Technomage. He had his own ways.

It had been over a year since Demon had last seen the Technomage, and although he wasn't one of her favorite people, she regretted his absence. He had left the Excalibur without saying goodbye, when Demon had wanted to see him and to thank him for saving her sister's life, as well as for rescuing them all from Centauri Prime. It had been a terrible time for everyone, recovering from the failed mission; a mission that had left many shattered lives in its wake, including Demon's. It had taken her a long time to recover from the shock of discovering she carried a part of a Vorlon inside her, and for her to come to terms with it remaining there, albeit in a dormant state.

Galen didn't respond. He stood as if frozen in place, the hood of his leather coat lifted over his head, half concealing his face, his staff gripped firmly in his left hand.

Demon tried again, moving closer to the Technomage, her full, black caftan swirling around her ankles as she moved. "Galen? Are you all right? Have you come to see Matthew? He's not here right now. Is something wrong?"

Galen shook his head, his lips moving as if in silent prayer, his right hand slowly lifting from his side. Demon watched with mounting concern as his hand started to glow and the sound of his words became audible. "Suffer not a witch to live."

Demon's eyes widened in terror as she realized what the Technomage was about to do. She shrieked, "No! Galen, no!" and started to turn away, trying to protect her belly with her arms, trying to reach the door out to the deck before Galen loosed his fireball.

It was too late. A fierce, burning pain seared through Demon's side, throwing her forward onto the floor. The agony was so great she didn't feel her head hit the kitchen cabinet, nor was she aware of the blood that poured from the resulting injury. She had only one thought as she

tried to curl herself around the pain, trying to protect her baby from her attacker. [[Angel!]]

She sent frantically through her link to her sister, knowing that it was too late, knowing that Angel was too far away to hear her, and could never save her, but unable to stop herself reaching out for one last touch, one last moment of comfort. [[Angel! Oh god, Angel, he's killing me! He's killing us both! I'm so sorry, Angel. Tell Matthew and Marcus I love them. I love you, too, Angel. I loved you all.]]

Demon forced out one last strangled whisper.

"He's killed our baby."

Galen froze in the act of launching his second fireball, the meaning of Demon's final words penetrating the emotional barriers he had created around him, the barriers he needed to carry out his mission. [Baby?]

His first sight of Demon as he'd entered the kitchen had nearly undone his resolution. She had looked so peaceful and happy standing looking out on the beach, her damp hair cascading down her back, the gentle breeze blowing softly through the open door from the deck, causing the skirts of her long, black robe to shift around her ankles.

Galen hadn't been able to see his target's face at first, but when she'd become aware of his presence she had turned. Her expression had been soft and dreamy before she had focused on the intruder in her home. The Technomage had never before that moment understood Matthew's passion for this woman. She was so cool and calm, so controlled, so icy in her demeanor. Demon was always polite and correct, her accents as clipped and refined as Galen's own, but she was not beautiful, not lovable. Angel was the beauty of the family as far as Galen was concerned. Angel, all fire and passion, not ice and indifference, like her sister.

But when Demon turned, her hand resting over her belly, a look of happiness had lit her face from inside, and she had glowed with health and beauty. That look had made Galen hesitate, his commitment shaken for a moment. Could anything that beautiful really be evil? He had been forced to shake himself free of the spell cast by the witch, closing his ears to her words when she spoke. Galen had lifted his hand and let loose the fireball intended to burn through her core and incinerate her.

That moment of hesitation had allowed Demon to turn and run, but it had not lasted long enough for her to escape. Galen had watched the fireball burn through her robe, through her skin, leaving a deep, cauterized wound in her side. He had seen her collapse and had raised his hand to deliver the killing blow when he heard her whisper, "He's killed our baby."

Galen's hand froze. The fireball hovered within his grasp, the heat burning his palm as it struggled for escape, longing to fulfill its function. To light, to burn, to kill. The Technomage could feel his creature's desire to escape, and reined it back. [Not yet, little one. Not yet.] He recovered the burning energy into himself, quenching the fireball for the moment.

The Technomage leaped forward and knelt at Demon's side, leaning on his staff and grasping Demon's shoulder roughly with his right hand, turning her onto her back. The witch was unconscious, but still alive. Just. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and Galen knew she would

soon die, her injuries too severe to allow her to live. Half her internal organs were burned beyond redemption, although her sudden movement had caused the fireball to hit her higher and more to one side than Galen had intended.

When the witch lay on her back, the Technomage could see the swelling of her abdomen through her robe, and he knew that Demon had spoken the truth. She was pregnant, and this time there could be no doubt as to who was the father. Galen had always been wary of Demon's son, convinced that he could easily carry a part of Lucas Buck's spirit. But this child would have been Matthew's. He had killed his friend's child, as well as his wife.

Galen straightened and raised his hand again. Killing Demon now would be a kindness. Even a witch should not be left to suffer a lingering death. It should be quick and clean.

As he rebuilt the energies of the fireball and prepared to loose the killing blow, a figure appeared as if from nowhere, inside the room. Galen found himself lifted from his feet and launched across the kitchen, crashing onto the table on the far side, barely hanging onto his staff as he fell.

Angel stood in the doorway, her raven hair lashing around her head as she whipped her gaze from the fallen Mage back to her sister. With a loud shriek, "NO!" Angel threw herself across the room, to fall to her knees beside her sister.

Angel kneeled by Demon's fallen body, shaking with anger and fear, sickened by the sight of the deep wound in her sister's side, and the blood pouring from Demon's head.

"Oh God, Demon, don't die! Please don't die!" Angel sobbed, as she used her skirts to try to staunch the bleeding. The raven-haired witch knew that it was hopeless. She could feel her sister's life-force seeping out of her. Demon was dying and there was nothing Angel could do to stop it.

She had been pulling up outside the beach house, her ground car's engine as silent as always, when Demon's sending through their link had reached her. The switch from happy anticipation at her sister's pleasure, to the almost paralyzing terror from hearing Demon's mental shriek, had left Angel frozen in her seat for what had seemed like hours. In reality, only fractions of a second had passed before Angel had unknowingly teleported herself out of the seat, through the door and into the kitchen, arriving in time to prevent Galen from delivering his second, killing blow.

Angel still wasn't sure how she had arrived so quickly at her sister's side, but she knew she was too late. Nothing and no one could save Demon now.

All Angel's fear, panic and anger found a focus as she heard movement behind her. Her sister's killer was moving. Well, he wouldn't be doing that for long. Her face distorted into a snarl of hatred, Angel turned in time to see the Technomage rising from the wreckage of the table, lifting his staff, ready to launch another attack.

Angel focused all her power and snatched the staff from Galen's hand with her telekinesis, flinging it across the room into the hallway beyond. Now she had a focal point for her hatred, a target on whom to vent her anguish and despair. Angel rose from her knees and moved toward the Technomage, her motion almost catlike, a panther stalking her prey. Galen raised

his hand to defend himself, and she saw the fireball glowing there. If he launched it, could she use her power to deflect it? Did she have the speed and strength? Angel found she didn't care. She didn't care if she lived or died. All she knew was that she was going to kill the Mage, no matter what the cost.

Lashing out with her power, Angel tried to force Galen's arm up and back, diverting the fireball, but he was ready for her. His hand held steady, not yet releasing his weapon, but directing it toward her.

For the first time since she had entered the kitchen, Galen spoke. "Angel, please, don't. Don't make me hurt you. I don't want to. I didn't want to hurt your sister, but it was my duty. I had to. There's nothing you can do now. Let it go."

Angel shrieked in fury. "Your *DUTY*? It's your duty to kill defenseless women and unborn babies? You bastard! You're not leaving this house alive!"

Channeling all her power, Angel again tried to bend Galen's arm, but it was useless. He was too strong. She saw the light glowing in his hand, and knew he was ready to release it. Only his feelings for her were preventing him from killing her in the same way he had murdered Demon. As the glow in Galen's hand built steadily, Angel closed her eyes and prepared to join her sister in death.

A bolt of light was accompanied by a screech of fury, and Angel opened her eyes to see Galen again lifted from his feet and thrown back into the splintered remains of the kitchen table. Something small and golden was making the unearthly noise, and wings that beat so fast they became a blur were assaulting Galen's head. He tried to cover his face with his arms, but the titanium talons of the tiny creature raked into his flesh, leaving bleeding scores down his face.

Spinning around, Angel opened her eyes wide in amazement when she saw Alwyn standing in the doorway. He held his own staff in his right hand, and Galen's staff in his left. His face was bereft of all emotions as he watched his familiar attack the other Mage, who was now cowering on the far side of the room.

Angel watched as Alwyn raised both staffs, sending beams of light across the room, which lifted Galen and pinned him against the wall, where he was unable to defend himself from Ishtar's ferocious attack. The tiny dragon launched herself at the younger Mage again, her claws fully extended, and her target obvious. Ishtar was about to rip Galen's eyes out of his face when Alwyn called her back. "Ishtar, enough."

The golden dragon stopped her attack, but her reluctance was obvious even to Angel. Ishtar remained on guard, hovering mere centimeters from Galen's bleeding face, ready to resume her assault at a second's notice.

Angel turned to Alwyn and screeched, "Let her finish the job! Let her kill him! Or let me do it. I want him dead, Alwyn. He's killed Demon and Mattie, and I won't rest until he pays for that." She was oblivious to the tears streaming down her face as she choked out the words, and begged the older Technomage to let her take her revenge.

Alwyn's expressionless mask faltered, and Angel saw the sadness in his eyes as he said softly, "Don't make yourself as bad as him, Angel. Let him fester in the darkness alone. Don't join him

there. You have no idea of your own power, and what it might cost you if you ever unleash your full strength. I know. I understand all too well the price that has to be paid for such anger. When Paedrig was taken from me, I went mad. I unleashed my power on the universe and committed some terrible acts. I have to live with the memories of those acts, and I would not wish such memories even on him." Alwyn gestured at the younger Mage, still pinned to the wall by Ishtar's attack. He went on sadly, "You are not a murderer, Angelique Denier, and neither is he. Your sister lives. For now."

Angel turned back to where Demon lay and she saw that Alwyn had spoken the truth. Demon's breathing was barely discernible, but she was still alive. Angel had no idea how her sister could still live, with the gaping hole in her side, but somehow she did. Dropping to her knees again, Angel gently cradled Demon's head in her lap, her sister's golden hair matted with blood as it fell across her knees.

Lifting her head again, Angel choked out, "But she's dying. Can you help her, Alwyn? Can you save her?"

Alwyn gave a sad smile as he said, "I will try."

He then focused his attention back on Galen, who still hung suspended against the far wall of the kitchen, Ishtar still hissing furiously centimeters from his face. "Galen, leave here and never return. It will be many a long year before you again have the power to harm these people. I will ensure that."

With those words, Alwyn lifted the two staffs he held into the air. He threw Galen's staff away from him, and it hovered motionless in front of the older Mage. Lifting his own staff slowly, Alwyn closed his eyes and whispered strange words. Eerie lights emanated from his hands, surrounding Galen's staff as it floated in mid-air.

Galen let out a shriek of dismay as the lights enclosed his staff and started to twist it. The staff began to bend back and forth, twisting and writhing under the forces Alwyn had summoned. At last, unable to withstand the pressures being brought to bear on it, the staff exploded silently into fragments.

Angel ducked her head, trying to use her body to shelter Demon from the blast, but there was no discharge, no debris, just a cloud of light, which quickly dispersed as Galen screamed in pain.

"You will never again use the tool provided by our order for destruction. Now go, and live the rest of your miserable life in pain."

Angel shuddered at the ferocity with which Alwyn had spoken. She had never before heard such hatred from the older man. She watched as Galen dropped to the floor, blood still flowing from the scores in his cheeks. The witch felt immense satisfaction at the sight, knowing that Ishtar's claws had sunk deep, and the Mage's face would forever bear the scars of betrayal, for all the universe to see. [But I still want him dead. One day...]

Angel's thoughts were distracted by a soft sound. Demon had given a little rattling gasp, and now fell silent. She had stopped breathing.

"Alwyn! Help her!" Angel shrieked at the older Mage, and she was almost too distracted to

notice Galen dragging himself from the room, as Alwyn rushed to her side.

Gideon watched his son playing in the sandpit and smiled. He leaned back in his seat, stretching long, black jeans clad legs out in front of him, as he glanced around the play-school garden to make sure the other children were all safely occupied, pondering on the route his life had taken. How had he gone from Captain of the ISA's flagship and savior of the human race to play-school monitor?

Not that he objected to his new role. Being a husband and father had its rewards, and a glance at the young, blonde play-school teacher bending over in her tight pants gave ample demonstration of one of those rewards. Gideon had never allowed himself to appreciate his female crewmembers' butts in that way, but now he let himself look. Just look. Not that he wanted to do more anyway. There was only one butt he really wanted to touch, [OK, Matt, be honest with yourself. Two.] Having the two most beautiful butts in the universe living in the same house with him was more than enough for any man.

Knowing that his wife and son were safe, being able to spend time with them whenever he wanted, and looking forward to the birth of his daughter, all helped make up for the lack of excitement and adventure in Gideon's life. The retired Captain decided that his new life may not have the highs of excitement and the adrenaline of adventure, but neither did it have the lows of depression and overwhelming guilt when he lost one of his people. That *should* be enough to make him content. [For the moment, at least.]

The sound of a whimper from the sandpit distracted Gideon's attention from the teacher's nicely rounded butt. Marcus looked up at his father, his expression anxious and distressed, and his golden eyes filling with tears as he said quietly, "Mummy's hurt."

Gideon stood quickly, frowning as he went over to his son. "What's the matter? What do you mean?"

Tears trickled down the child's face as he whimpered again. "A bad man hurt Mummy. She cried and now I can't hear her. Where's she gone, Daddy? Why can't I hear Mummy?"

Marcus started to sob in earnest and Gideon swept his son up into his arms, hugging him tightly. The little boy's cries had attracted the teacher's attention, and she now came over to where Gideon stood.

"Matt? Is there a problem? Did Marcus hurt himself?" The young blonde reached out to touch Marcus' forehead, looking anxiously at the child.

Gideon shook his head. "I'm not sure what the problem is, Jean, but I think I'd better get him home." He didn't want to explain to the teacher the link Marcus shared with his mother. Deborah's empathic powers were still a family secret, and they had done their best to keep Marcus from disclosing his own abilities to strangers. Fortunately, most people just thought of the little boy as being considerate, not appreciating that he could sense their feelings. This was exactly how Gideon wanted it to stay. The last thing he wanted was the Bureau of Telepath Integration having any idea of the talents his wife and son possessed.

Jean smiled gently as she wiped the tears from Marcus' cheeks with her handkerchief. By now

Marcus was sobbing hysterically, and Gideon worried in case his son started to project his emotions. "I'm sorry to leave you short-handed, Jean, but I really should get him out of here, before he sets the other kids off."

Gideon's anxiety levels were rising with every minute that passed. What was going on at home? What had happened to Deborah? Marcus wasn't the most reliable reporter in the world--you could hardly expect that of a four-year-old--but something bad must have happened to get him so upset.

Jean smiled again, saying, "It's OK, Matt. I understand. Just let me know if he's sick, so we can keep an eye on the other children."

With a quick nod of acknowledgement, Gideon turned and fled through the main building, to where his ground-car was parked outside, trying hard to project feelings of safety and reassurance at his son, in a futile attempt at calming him.

As he strapped Marcus into his seat, Gideon was aware of the looks he was being given by passers-by. The screaming child was attracting more attention than he liked, and the last thing he needed at that moment was well-intentioned interference. He just wanted to get Marcus home, so he could find out what had happened to Deborah.

Pulling away from the parking lot, Gideon activated the transmitter in his car. "Call home." The vehicle's computer was programmed to recognize short voice commands, and immediately attempted to connect Gideon to his home comm. network. Weaving his way through traffic, he waited impatiently for a response, but none came. After a few seconds, the computer said softly, "Unable to obtain response. Network engaged."

"Keep trying." Gideon spat the words out over Marcus' cries, which were becoming more and more frantic as he called for his mother. Gideon's fear continued to grow. Nothing he said or did calmed his son and he became convinced that something very bad indeed must have happened.

[Answer the phone, for god's sake answer, Deborah. Tell me you're all right. Tell me Marcus is having a bad dream, tell me anything you damn well like, but talk to me! Pick up the goddamned phone!]

The thoughts raced around Gideon's mind as he pushed his vehicle to the limit, cutting up other ground-cars in his haste to get past them. Periodically, the onboard computer repeated its lack of success in making contact with his home, and tried to persuade him to reduce his speed and drive less recklessly. Gideon ignored it, his mind racing, going over Marcus' few coherent words again and again. [A bad man hurt Mummy? What bad man? Hurt how?] Gideon knew the security system built into the house would have protected Deborah against intruders. Who could have overcome that system? And why? [She was supposed to be safe. That's why I brought her here, to be safe!]

When Gideon finally reached the road leading to their beach house, his fears increased as he heard the sound of sirens. [Oh god, no, please no, let it be for someone else. It can't be. It just can't be...]

Gideon's thoughts trailed off in dismay as he saw the police and paramedics drawn up outside

his house, the lights on top of their vehicles flashing red and blue in the shade of the palm trees that lined the street.

Screeching to a halt at the curb, Gideon leaped out and ran across the lawn toward the house, only to be halted by a uniformed police officer, who stepped into his path, saying, "Whoa there. Where do you think you're going?"

Gideon wanted to punch the idiot who was blocking his progress, but gritted his teeth, knowing it wouldn't help. "This is my house. My wife's in there. What's going on?"

The sound of Marcus' hysterical cries from the open door of the ground car attracted both men's attention, and Gideon ran back to release his son from his seat, closely followed by the now somber police officer.

As Gideon unfastened the restraints holding Marcus in place and lifted him from the car, the officer said quietly, "Show me some ID."

Gideon fished his wallet from his back pocket with one hand as he held his screaming son with his other arm. The officer looked at the ID, then back up at Gideon. Nodding his recognition, he said, "OK. I didn't know you were *that* Matthew Gideon. Jeeze, I'm really sorry about this, but I'm afraid your wife's been attacked and badly hurt." Gideon started to run toward the house, but the officer held his arm, dragging him back, saying softly, "You probably shouldn't take your boy in there. It's a bit of a mess. Let me get someone to help you."

The officer lifted his arm and spoke softly into his commlink, while Gideon stood frozen to the spot, hardly aware of his son's sobs. [Mess? Hurt? He said 'hurt'. Not dead. Oh god, Deborah, please don't be dead. You can't be dead.] He felt as if a cloud of numbness had settled over him, eradicating all his reactions, his emotions, his ability to think and feel. All he could do was to tell himself over and over that Deborah had to be alive.

A female officer came over and took Marcus from Gideon, releasing him to run across the lawn and into the house, where another policewoman waved him through to the kitchen.

Angel stood in the corner of the kitchen, gnawing at the knuckle of her right index finger. She wasn't aware of the pain where the skin had broken under her teeth, nor of the taste of blood in her mouth. She was hardly aware of Alwyn's arm around her shoulders as they stood in silence, watching the paramedics work on Demon.

The last half hour had been a whirl of frantic activity followed by a period of total immobility, and Angel wasn't sure which had been worse. When Galen had fled, Alwyn had barked orders at her, telling her to call the paramedics. Angel had leaped to the comm. unit, somehow staying in control of herself as she'd summoned help.

Alwyn had stayed at Demon's side, muttering words, passing his staff over her body, using a strange crystal which he'd swept over the ghastly wound in her side. Angel hadn't been sure what Alwyn had done, but she'd heard Demon's gasp as she'd started breathing again. Somehow the Technomage had kept her alive until help arrived, and sometime during that period Ishtar had disappeared.

Having summoned help, Angel had then tried to call Matt, to tell him to come home. The comm. unit had first advised her that there was no answer, then after a few moments, told her that Matt's ground-car communicator was in use, and it could not make a connection. Angel had told it to keep trying, just as the sound of sirens outside had sent her rushing to the front door to let the paramedics into the house.

In the wake of their arrival, there was nothing more for Angel to do. So she had stood quietly near the doorway, resisting all attempts to move her, determined to stay as close as she could to her sister. Alwyn had joined her and spoken to her quietly, so when the police had asked her questions, she had been ready with her answers.

Looking up into the Technomage's sad eyes, Angel had whispered, "Will they live? Tell me they'll live."

Alwyn had closed his eyes and sighed deeply, hugging Angel to his side. "They have a chance. A small one. I've called Sarah and she's on her way to the hospital where they'll take Demon as soon as they have her stabilized. If anyone can save them, Sarah will."

Angel had nodded. Sarah Chambers was a great doctor. She had helped save Dureena and Ilori when there had been complications during Ilori's birth. The only doctor Angel would have preferred to have helping her sister was Luke Raven, but he was still on the Excalibur, hundreds of light years away.

[Sarah will save them. She has to.] The words circled around and around in Angel's head as she chewed her knuckle, glancing anxiously at the comm. unit, wondering why it couldn't get through to Matt.

The door burst open and Angel was startled to see her brother-in-law rush in. Before he could run to his wife's side, Alwyn grabbed his arm and held him back. "Wait. There's nothing you can do for her at the moment. Don't interfere. Let them do their jobs. They're keeping her alive."

Matt looked startled as he recognized the Technomage holding him back, then he saw Angel standing at Alwyn's side. Matt's face was a picture of anguished confusion as he asked, "What happened? Who did this?" He looked from Angel to Alwyn and back, then he looked down at Angel's skirt and flinched.

Angel's eyes followed his gaze and she realized that her skirt was dark with Demon's blood. Why had she chosen to wear a white cotton skirt and top that day? Why not her usual red? Demon's blood wouldn't have been so obvious against red. Angel pushed aside the irrelevant thoughts and tried to find the words she needed to answer Matt's questions, but they stuck in her throat. All that came out was a strangled sob of pain.

Before she knew what was happening, Matt had swept her into his arms and was hugging her tightly. Angel wasn't sure who was comforting who, but the feel of his arms around her, and the warmth of his hard body, gave her the strength she needed to collect herself and to tell him what had happened.

In between hiccups and sobs, with her head buried in Matt's shoulder, Angel quietly told him how she had finished her meeting with her agent earlier than she'd expected, so she had driven

home quickly, intending to surprise Demon and take her out for lunch. She described how she had felt Demon's sending just as she pulled up outside, and had rushed in to help her sister.

That part of her story still confused Angel. She had no recollection of how she'd got from her runabout to the kitchen. It seemed as if she'd been in one place at one second, and another the next, with no sense of transition between the two. Dismissing the issue as unimportant, Angel took a deep breath and told Matt what she had seen when she'd arrived in the kitchen.

As soon as he heard Galen's name, Matt growled with anger. Angel felt him shift slightly, and she pushed herself back a little so she could look up at him. He was staring at Alwyn, his voice full of anger and hatred as he said, "Galen? Did he do this?"

Angel watched as Alwyn nodded sadly. She could feel Matt shaking as he still held her, and knew he was beside himself with fury.

"Why? Why would he want to kill Deborah now? Did he know she was pregnant? Did he want to kill our baby? Did you know this was going to happen?"

The questions were spat out with a force that made Alwyn draw back slightly. Matt was full of righteous anger, and even a Technomage could be intimidated by him in that mood.

Alwyn said quietly, "I knew it was a possibility. I set up various protections around your wife, barriers that should have kept him away, or alerted me if he got close. The alarm worked, but I was too late to stop him." Gideon was about to speak but Alwyn hurried on before he could interrupt. "As to why, you know the answer to that question." He lowered his voice so it wouldn't carry to the paramedics who were now carefully lifting Demon onto a stretcher. "You know what Demon carries inside her. Not just your child, but something else. Something Galen hates and fears above all else. He came to destroy the Vorlon."

Angel felt Matt's arms tighten around her, and again he shook with anger. His voice was low and full of menace as he said softly, "I'll kill him for this. Some day, some how, I'll kill him."

Angel looked up and lifted her hand to his face. Running her hand along his jaw, she attracted his attention. When he looked down at her, Angel could see Matt's golden brown eyes were cold and full of rage. The sight of them sent a shiver through her body. At that moment, Matt looked more like Lucas than she had ever seen him look before. Matt was in the grip of his own rage, and if Angel didn't stop him, she knew he could easily slide down a slope of hatred and revenge, making him into a replica of Lucas Buck. One Lucas in the universe was more than enough.

"Matt, not now. We'll deal with Galen later, and we'll help you. I'll help you, and Alwyn will help you." The young witch glared at the Technomage, who bowed his head, whether in sorrow or agreement, Angel wasn't sure, but she hurried on. "But that can wait. For now, we have to focus on saving Demon."

The shock of seeing Lucas staring out of Matt's eyes had brought Angel's strength back. She felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over her, and suddenly she could think coherently again. Gesturing at the stretcher the paramedics were now lifting to a gurney, she said, "You'd better go with them, Matt. Where's Marcus?"

Matt's eyes changed, filling with pain, washing away the rage. Angel heaved a sigh of relief as

he spoke, his voice full of suffering. "A policewoman is taking care of him outside. He felt it, Angel. Marcus felt his mother's pain."

A single tear leaked from Matt's eye, and Angel lifted her hand to wipe it away. "He'll forget, Matt. We'll help him forget. Now go with Demon. She needs you by her side. Alwyn and I will bring Marcus. I just have to change..."

Angel looked down at her bloody skirt, and her newfound control nearly deserted her. She chided herself, [No time for that now. Matt needs you to be strong. Help him.] Putting aside all her own grief, Angel straightened and pushed Matt gently away from her, pressing him toward the stretcher on which Demon lay.

Demon's face was white, marred by streaks of blood from the scalp wound inflicted by her fall. Her body was totally enclosed in what looked like a white body bag, but Angel had seen enough of what the paramedics were doing to know that the bag contained all sorts of life support equipment, which they had attached to Demon.

Matt followed the stretcher silently as they wheeled it from the kitchen, his hand resting by the side of Demon's face, just close enough to let his fingers brush her cheek. Angel longed to run after him, to comfort him, to do anything she could to relieve his pain, but she told herself that this wasn't the time.

Alwyn's hand on her arm brought her attention back to him, and he smiled at her, saying, "We should go."

Angel forced a smile to her face, and said, "Just let me get changed. You know I've never been very good about the sight of blood. The last thing you need is me passing out every time I look at my own skirt."

Rushing from the kitchen and up the stairs to her room, Angel told herself over and over that Demon was strong. Demon was always there. Demon was never going to leave her again. She'd promised and Demon always kept her promises.

Angel sent through her link to her sister, [[You hear that, Demon? You're not allowed to die. Don't even think about it.]]

Gideon looked down at his wife, lying pale and still on the stretcher. The ambulance swayed as it rounded a corner quickly, and the retired Captain clutched a handle over his head with one hand to keep himself steady, shutting the screeching sound of the siren from his mind. With his free hand, he stroked the soft skin of Deborah's cheek as he whispered softly to her, "Stay with me, Deborah."

He refused to acknowledge the pain and fear that threatened to overwhelm him at the sight of Deborah looking so still. She never looked this quiet when she slept. She was a restless sleeper, and her face was often more mobile in her dreams than when she was awake. To see his wife like this, to feel the coolness of her cheek, frightened Gideon more than anything had ever scared him before.

He remembered hanging in space alone, waiting to die of asphyxiation after the destruction of

the Cerberus, but even that hadn't terrified him as much as Deborah's apparently lifeless form. Being banished from his own body to the oblivion of the Apocalypse Box had been less frightening to Gideon than the prospect of losing his wife and daughter now.

Fighting back tears of grief and anger, Gideon reached out again with his free hand, and tried to untangle Deborah's hair where it was matted with blood. As he tugged gently at the knots, he whispered, "You promised me you'd never leave me. You never break your promises, Deborah and I'm holding you to this one. I need you. Marcus needs you. Mattie needs you."

His eyes drifted to the middle of the life support bag that enclosed his wife, but the bulk of it concealed the gentle swelling of her belly, hiding the place where his daughter still hung onto life. In answer to his frantic questions, the paramedics had pointed out the readings that showed Mattie was still alive, her tiny heart beating rapidly, independently of her mother's heartbeat, which gave a slow, [Too slow!] unsteady beat.

Gideon placed his hand over Deborah's belly and whispered, "Hang on, Mattie. Everything's going to be all right. It has to be."

He was almost flung from his seat as the ambulance pulled up sharply in front of the hospital and the doors were thrown open. The light streamed in, silhouetting a figure standing outside, and Gideon squinted into the sun to see who it was. Recognizing the person standing there, he heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Sarah. Thank God."

Angel watched anxiously as Gideon paced the floor of the hospital waiting room. Less than an hour had passed since they had arrived and Demon had been rushed into surgery, but time seemed to be standing still, and it felt like an eternity. Marcus lay on the couch next to Angel, his head resting in her lap, his breathing slow and regular as he slept, curled around his favorite, earless teddy bear.

Angel was glad she had remembered to snatch Half-Ted from Marcus' room before rushing out to the family vehicle, where Alwyn had strapped Marcus into his child seat while Angel had been changing. Marcus had reached for his bear as soon as he'd seen it, and his anguished wailing had calmed into little whimpers of distress as he'd hugged his favorite toy. As soon as Angel had emerged from the house, Alwyn had vanished, saying he'd meet her at the hospital. The young witch had driven like a maniac, constantly aware of her nephew's little sobs as she drove, desperate to reunite the child with his father as soon as she could.

Focusing on that had distracted Angel from other thoughts, thoughts that threatened her sanity if she dwelt on them. [Demon won't die. Sarah will save her. Alwyn will save her. *Someone* will save her. Somebody has to!] The prospect of life without her sister was unbearable. Since she'd been a teenager, alone after her mother's death, Demon had been there for Angel, a rock, a tower of strength for Angel to lean on. The few months she had spent apart from her sister on Babylon 5 had been the hardest in Angel's life and she never wanted to repeat them.

Shaking her head free of the unacceptable possibility that her sister might die, Angel had concentrated on her driving, arriving at the hospital just in time to see Demon's stretcher being carried in through the main entrance, with Matt trailing close behind.

A few minutes later, Angel had carried Marcus into the waiting room, and had found Matt and Alwyn already there. She had no idea how Alwyn had arrived before her, but she'd noticed he had changed. He no longer wore his Technomage robes and his staff was nowhere in sight. Instead, a smartly dressed, middle-aged man waited with her brother-in-law, and if Ishtar was in the vicinity, she remained well hidden.

Marcus had screamed for his father as soon as he saw him, and Matt had taken the small boy from Angel, cuddling and comforting his son, whispering words of reassurance, which Angel could only hope Matt truly believed, or Marcus would feel the lie at once. Whatever Matt had said, it seemed to calm the child, and soon he had been content to lie on the sofa next to Angel, hugging his teddy bear tightly, while his father had paced the floor in silence.

Alwyn sat opposite Angel, his face like stone, apparently wrapped in his own deep thoughts.

Angel looked down and gently stroked her nephew's blond curls, the curls he had inherited from his mother. Marcus looked more like his father in most other respects, but his hair was pure Demon. Touching the soft, golden curls made Angel think of the times Demon had threatened to shave Marcus' head to prevent tangles. It had always been an empty promise, no more intended than her threat to cut her own hair short, in an attempt to control it. Angel couldn't help but smile sadly as she remembered Matt's response that he'd divorce Demon if she ever cut her hair. Another empty threat.

Suddenly, she became aware that Matt's pacing had stopped and he was standing in front of her, watching her stroke Marcus' hair. Looking up, she knew Matt thoughts had taken him along similar lines to her own. He, too, was remembering Demon's hair, and his face showed all his pain and anguish.

"Don't." Angel barely breathed the word as she reached out and took Matt's hand, squeezing it tightly.

Matt managed a half-hearted smile, took a deep breath and said, "Sarah said we could have to wait quite a while for news. While we wait, you may as well carry on from where you left off earlier. What happened after you interrupted Galen?"

Alwyn spared Angel from having to recount her story, speaking quietly, making sure his voice would not be heard in the corridor outside the waiting room, as he described his own arrival, and Ishtar's attack on Galen. He went on to tell how Galen's staff had been destroyed and the younger Mage had fled.

"It is of little comfort to you now, I know, but without his staff, it will be a long time before Galen can become so powerful again. Much of his strength was channeled through that staff. He will have to find another channel, before he can attack again."

Gideon span on his heel and glared at Alwyn. "Again? What do you mean again? He'll be dead or in jail before he can try again. If the cops don't get him, I will." Angel shuddered as she watched Matt's eyes turn cold again. Somehow, she knew she was going to have to stop Matt killing Galen. That act could destroy Gideon, turning him into too close a copy of his ancestor. Angel had no idea how or when she could do it, but she knew that she would have to carry the burden of destroying the Mage herself.

Before she could even start to contemplate the difficulty of the task she had just set for herself, Angel was distracted by Alwyn's response. "The Earth Alliance Bureau of Investigation will not catch Galen. They do not know who to look for."

Gideon exploded, yelling almost incoherently at the Technomage, who lifted his right hand, made a gesture, and the room plunged into silence. Matt's mouth continued to move for a few seconds, then he realized the futility of his attempts to berate Alwyn, and he stopped speaking. Staring at the retired Captain through narrowed, threatening eyes, the Technomage nodded sharply, waved his hand again and said in a voice filled with quiet menace, "If you don't control yourself, I will turn you into a frog. And not a living frog where you can croak your discontent at me unceasingly from the confines of my pockets, but into a marble frog which I will plant in the Earth Force Memorial Garden as a reminder to all of the necessity of learning to keep one's mouth firmly shut!"

Matt nodded, his face like thunder as he collapsed back into the seat opposite, glaring at Alwyn, who went on quietly, "Before the police arrived, I persuaded Angel to corroborate my story that she and I arrived at the house together, and interrupted an unknown intruder in the act of attacking your wife. The assailant was startled by our unexpected arrival and ran off. We did not see anything of his face, and only caught a glimpse of his attire. We did not see what weapon he used. This is what we told the police, explaining that Angel lived in the house and I was an old friend of the family, come to visit. Before the police arrived I cast a spell--a glamour--to confuse their sight. They saw what they expected to see; an elderly man, conventionally dressed, with no staff in evidence. They do not know, and must not know, what I am."

Gideon said one word, softly, but his face was full of pain as he asked, "Why?" His voice cracked, preventing him from continuing until he swallowed several times and went on, "Why shouldn't the EABI know about you and Galen? Without that knowledge, they have no chance of catching him."

Alwyn shook his head sadly. "They *never* had any chance of catching him. His ship was outside the house, fully stealthed. He was long gone from this planet before the police arrived. He will not return soon."

Gideon leaned forward, looking from Alwyn to Angel and back. Angel could see he didn't understand, and her heart went out to him. He desperately wanted, needed, Galen to be caught and punished, but it seemed as if his friends and family were conspiring to prevent it. Before Matt could ask another question, Angel spoke softly.

"Matt, we had to do it like that. If we'd told the police who Galen was, we'd have been forced to explain why Galen was there. Why he attacked Demon." Angel's voice quavered and she found herself unable to continue.

Alwyn took up the story. "Would you have wanted us to explain Galen's motives? To tell the police what lives within Demon, what Galen wished to destroy? It would have been a short step from there to the revelation that your wife and her sisters are not what they seem. You could have lost them all, and Marcus, too."

Matt's face showed his anguish at that thought, and after a few moments of silence, he nodded slowly. "You did the right thing. You couldn't take that risk. So..."

Standing again, Gideon took a deep breath and threw his shoulders back, his face clearing of pain and expressing only hatred as he hissed, "So I'll take care of it myself."

Angel went to protest, but Alwyn caught her eye and shook his head almost imperceptibly. He didn't want her to speak, to try to stop Matt feeling that way. Angel sat back in her seat and sighed. She guessed she understood. At that time, Matt needed a focus for his anger and hatred, an outlet for his pain. They could talk to him more rationally when they knew Demon was safe.

A thought suddenly struck Angel, and she was almost overwhelmed with guilt that she hadn't thought of it earlier. Alwyn's mention of the 'sisters' had finally sunk in and reminded Angel that she had two other sisters, both far away. Lily and Ilas would have to be told. How would she find the strength to tell them what had happened? Almost laughing at herself, Angel decided to procrastinate, as she did with so many things in her life. She would call them when she had definite news; news that Demon was all right and that she was going to recover. As soon as she had that news, Angel would call her sisters.

A wave of fear swept through Angel as she had another thought. She asked anxiously, "Alwyn, what about Ilas and Lily? Is there any risk that Galen will attack them? We're all tainted by the Vorlons. He may want to kill them, too!"

Alwyn shook his head and moved to take Angel's hand, squeezing it gently. "No, my dear. We will warn them, of course, but Galen's hatred is focused on one thing only: the Vorlon that still lives inside your sister. Much as he hates the Vorlon, even he has learned to believe that you, Lily and Ilas were their victims, not their tools. He was coming to believe that of Demon, too, but when he found out about the part of the Vorlon she still carries..." Alwyn sighed deeply before continuing, "He lost all perspective and reason where she is concerned. Your other sisters are safe. Don't worry about them."

Angel heaved a sigh of relief, then looked at her watch. She could hardly believe that it was still only just gone 5:00 in the afternoon. The day seemed to be lasting forever.

29th November 2273 - 1:00 a.m.

Gideon paced the floor of the waiting room, back and forth, wondering when there would be some news, telling himself over and over that as long as no one came out of surgery, Deborah and Mattie were still alive. [No news is good news, right?] He wasn't sure he believed his own thoughts any more. [They have to be safe. They just have to be.]

Angel and Marcus were both deeply asleep on the couch, Angel curled around Gideon's son, looking as if she was trying to shield him, to protect him from something. [From what? The news that his mother is dead? No one can protect Marcus from that.]

The retired Captain was almost overwhelmed by the need to pick up his son, to cuddle the little boy, to both give and receive comfort, but he knew it was a selfish impulse. He knew he should let Marcus sleep. Instead, Gideon focused his gaze on the Technomage, sitting quietly alongside the sleeping pair, eyes closed, apparently deep in meditation if not sleep.

"Alwyn, wake up," Gideon growled softly, reining back the anger that he could so easily have

allowed to seep into his voice.

The Mage's eyes opened slowly. "I am awake. I have been communicating with my ship, trying to track Galen's progress, but he is long gone from this system, and apparently from this part of the galaxy."

Gideon grunted, not sure if this was good news or not. On the one hand, if Galen had gone he couldn't try to murder Deborah again. On the other hand, the Technomage had put himself out of Gideon's reach, and Gideon's immediate need for revenge was strong enough to taste. [I'll kill him. Someday, somehow, I'll kill him.]

Pushing those thoughts aside, Gideon asked, "How do you know? Didn't you say his ship was stealthed?"

Alwyn shook his head. "That was before I destroyed his staff. That implement contained many of Galen's powers, including his ability to hide his ship from other Mages. If his ship was within this sector of the galaxy, I would know."

Gideon stopped pacing, and stood in front of the Mage, glaring down at him. "If you know so much, tell me what's happening in there." He hooked his thumb in the direction of the surgical suite where his wife's life still hung in the balance.

Alwyn shook his head sadly. "That is beyond my powers, and you will find out very soon anyway. In fact..." The Technomage's voice trailed off as they both heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside.

Gideon spun around, just as Sarah Chambers appeared in the doorway. He barely noticed the lines of exhaustion etched into the doctor's dark skin. His only concern was the complete lack of expression on her face. That deadpan look was one he had learned over many years to associate with bad news. Sarah always smiled when the news was good.

"Oh God, no. Please, Sarah, don't..."

"Demon and the baby are both alive." Sarah interrupted before Gideon could finish his sentence. Then she paused, long enough for his relief to roll over and through him, then drain away as if it had never been. Sarah continued, "For the moment."

Gideon held himself firmly under control, telling himself not to lose it now. Years of Earthforce training in controlling his response to bad news gave him the strength to say quietly, "Explain." He bit the word off, not trusting himself to say more.

Sarah sighed, pulling off the silver cap that covered her head, allowing her long dark hair to fall loose. She waved Gideon to a free couch, then pausing only to grasp the hand Alwyn held out to her, squeezing it gently as she smiled sadly at her partner, she followed the retired Captain and sat down next to him.

Taking Gideon's hand gently in her own, she held it for a moment, gazing across at where Angel and Marcus still lay deeply asleep. It was obvious to Gideon that she was collecting her thoughts, trying to find the words to tell him whatever bad news she carried. Somehow, he held onto his patience, and didn't scream at her to get on with it, to get it over with. Somehow, he stayed calm, sitting beside Sarah on the couch, trying not to grip her hand as if

his life [Or Deborah's,] depended on it.

Sarah took a deep breath and spoke in a soft, emotionless voice.

"Demon's injuries are severe. A Technomage fireball is a particularly nasty weapon, combining elements of heat, electrical impulses and a vibrating effect that disrupts cells, exploding them from the inside. If Galen's fireball had hit Demon in the center of her body, she would have died within seconds."

She squeezed Gideon's hand, helping him stay under control as she went on, "But she was lucky. Demon must have turned and twisted just as he loosed it at her. It struck her on her left side, burning through and exiting before it could kill her. The good news is that the fireball cauterized the wound it made, and she didn't lose too much blood from that site. Her blood loss came solely from a scalp wound. She must have hit her head as she fell, but it was a glancing blow. Messy, but not dangerous. That means the flow of blood to her uterus and the baby wasn't interrupted. The baby is fine."

Gideon was almost ready to allow himself to hope, but he remembered her earlier words, and asked softly, "If that's the good news, what's the bad news, Sarah?" He had to know.

He stared into Sarah's kind, dark eyes as she sighed again. "The bad news is that the combination of heat, electrical discharge and the disrupter effect damaged most of Demon's internal organs beyond repair. We've had to remove her liver, spleen, gall bladder, both kidneys, part of her left lung and both ovaries."

Gideon began to feel sick and his nausea increased as Sarah cataloged the damage done to his wife. How could she survive that? He dropped his head and stared at the floor, trying to come to terms with what he'd just heard, then he slowly became aware that Sarah was still speaking. She dragged his attention back as she squeezed his hand, saying, "Matt? Did you hear what I just said?"

He shook his head, and looked up, again staring into the doctor's dark brown eyes, so expressive of the sorrow she felt at the news she had to give him.

Sarah repeated her words, quietly, allowing Gideon time to absorb their meaning. "Her heart wasn't damaged, her right lung is completely intact, and her left lung is still functional. The fireball ripped through the middle of her body, but the damage didn't spread. Her uterus wasn't harmed at all. That's why the baby wasn't hurt."

Gideon closed his eyes and sent a silent prayer of thanks to a god he didn't believe in. Then he remembered Sarah's earlier words. [For the moment. What did she mean by that?]

Looking up into the doctor's tired face, he asked his question. Sarah sighed and frowned, again silent for a moment while she sought the right words.

"We have Demon on full life support, which will keep her and the baby alive, but only for a limited time. We can replace the parts we've removed with artificial organs, which will buy us the time we need to clone and grow organic replacements. That will take a few weeks. The problem is..." Sarah trailed off and looked over at her partner. Gideon followed her gaze and saw Alwyn close his eyes, an expression of grief flickering briefly across his face before it settled into impassivity. Alwyn obviously knew what Sarah was about to say, and it could only be

bad.

Gideon shifted his gaze back to the doctor, and he squeezed her hand, urging her, "Go on."

Sarah took another deep breath. "The operation to implant the artificial organs will kill the baby. There's no chance of her surviving the operation."

The words came out in a rush and Gideon felt as if Sarah had plunged a knife into his gut and twisted it. He dropped his head again closing his eyes and whispering, "No, please, not Mattie." To him the baby wasn't just an impersonal fetus, something distant and hidden inside his wife's belly. Mattie was his little girl, the child of his future, who he'd imagined growing up into a beautiful woman. She was the main reason he'd taken early retirement, giving up a career and a life he had loved, so Mattie could be born and grow up in safety. So many of Gideon's hopes and dreams were invested in the baby who Sarah was now telling him would have to die.

Shaking his head, Gideon forced out his next words against a rising wave of anger. "No. There has to be another way. There has to be a way Mattie can live." He lifted his head and glared at Sarah, challenging her to provide him with an alternative.

Sarah gripped his hands firmly as she said, "If we don't perform the operation, Mattie will live..."

Gideon felt a surge of hope, which drained away instantly as the doctor went on, "But if we don't carry out that operation, Demon will die. We can keep her alive for a few weeks, long enough for Mattie to grow--long enough for Mattie to be removed and be able to survive, which she can't now. She's too young now, but given another four or five weeks, the baby can survive on her own. But without the support of the artificial organs, Demon will be brain dead within a week. We can keep her body alive much longer, Matt, long enough for the baby to live, but Demon will be gone."

Tears trickled down Sarah's face as she gave Gideon the awful truth. He was faced with a choice. Either his wife or his daughter could live, but not both.

Gideon knew what his choice had to be. He couldn't live without Deborah. He couldn't tell Marcus that he had allowed his mother to die. But neither could he stand the thought of losing the daughter he already adored. He shook his head, the wave of anger building inside him, as he growled, "No. Not acceptable. I won't...I can't choose. You can't make me do that."

The anger had now built to a point where he could no longer contain it, and it exploded out of him, finding as a target the only person in the room he could in some way blame for this disaster, other than himself. Rounding on Alwyn, Gideon yelled, "This is your fault! You knew this was going to happen, and you didn't warn us, you didn't give me the chance to protect them. If I'd known, I'd never have left Deborah alone, I'd have been there, I'd have done something, I'd..."

Alwyn interrupted, his voice calm but strong, "You would have died. Galen would have killed you before killing your wife. Your son would be an orphan."

Gideon shook his head, not caring if what the Technomage said was true or not. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. He carried on yelling, "I don't care. It's still down to you, Alwyn."

Deborah looks on you as the father she never had. She loves you, and you let her down. Don't let her die and don't let our daughter die. If you could fix Dureena so she could have a child of her own, fix this, too!"

The sound of shouting penetrated the depths of Angel's sleep and she slowly sat upright, rubbing her eyes as she opened them. She didn't understand what was happening, but it was obvious that Matt was incredibly angry about something, and all his anger seemed directed at Alwyn.

A whimper of distress attracted Angel's attention to the little boy who had been sleeping at her side. Marcus had also been awakened by the shouting, and Angel knew he must be sensing his father's fury and frustration, as well hearing the angry words. She quickly gathered the little boy into her arms and cuddled him, looking from Matt to Alwyn, trying to figure out what was going on, while she tried to comfort Marcus.

Sarah leaped to her feet and tried to calm Matt, grabbing his arm to drag him away from her partner as she said, "Stop it, Matt. You're being unfair. I know you're hurting, but this isn't Alwyn's fault, and he can't help. Doing what he did for Dureena nearly killed him. You can't ask him to do that again."

Matt turned angrily on Sarah, and was obviously about to switch targets when Alwyn said calmly, "Yes, he can. I *can* help, and I will."

The Technomage rose slowly to his feet and stepped forward, confronting Gideon as he spun around. "You do not need to remind me of my responsibilities, Matthew. I am all too aware of my obligations to your wife. If she thinks of me as the father she never had, that is only right, as to me she is more dear than any daughter could be. I will do what I can to save her and your child. I could do nothing less."

Angel felt tears welling up in her eyes at the quiet dignity with which Alwyn spoke. It totally deflated Matt, who rocked back, unable to find words to reply. The resulting silence was finally broken when Sarah asked, "How? How can you help, Alwyn?"

The Technomage stepped forward, reaching out to caress the doctor's face. Sarah dropped her head and raised her hand to cover his, the love between them obvious to Angel in their every movement and look. Marcus stopped crying as he sensed that love, and felt the anger draining away from his father.

Alwyn looked from Sarah to Matt, and said softly, "I can keep Demon alive without the artificial organs, and without her suffering irreversible brain damage, for a few weeks at least. It will be difficult, but it can be done. This will allow time for the baby to grow strong enough to survive independently of her mother, and for Sarah to grow the new organs Demon will need to survive."

Angel gasped as she at last understood what the fight had been about. They had been arguing about Demon's life, and Alwyn had now confirmed that he might be able to save both Demon and her child. She watched as Alwyn sighed deeply, then he moved to stand by Sarah, putting his arm around the doctor's waist as he smiled sadly, saying, "I'm really getting too old for

this, you know. I should know better than to go around acquiring surrogate daughters, son-in-laws and grandchildren at my age. Before I let you people drag me into your affairs, Ishtar and I were quite content with each other's company. It was peaceful then. Now I have a growing family that seems determined to deprive me of my few remaining hairs, and my peace of mind."

Alwyn's effort to lighten the atmosphere had little impact on Matt, but Angel was grateful for the attempt. Now the adults had stopped shouting, Marcus had stopped whimpering, and seemed to be dozing again, his head resting on Angel's shoulder. She could only hope that he would soon drop off to sleep.

Sarah leaned to one side and gently kissed Alwyn's cheek, saying softly, "It might have been peaceful, but it was also dull. Stop complaining about your new life, you know you love it." She then turned to Matt and said, "I hope Alwyn's right, but he's going to have to show me a lot of new things to make this work."

Alwyn smiled gently and gave the doctor's waist a quick squeeze. "I've been showing you new things almost every day since you let me seduce you."

Turning back to Gideon the Mage's face fell into more somber lines. "Matthew, this won't be easy and there are no guarantees. I will have to keep Demon in a state where her life forces are almost non-existent, but her body functions continue to support the baby, for several weeks." He turned back to Sarah, asking, "How long will it be before the child can live independently of her mother?"

Angel watched as Sarah frowned, pulling at her lip as she calculated, asking, "Demon is twenty-two weeks pregnant, right?"

Matt nodded, visibly swallowing, his voice shaking slightly as he said. "Yesterday. Mattie was twenty-two weeks old yesterday. We know exactly when she was conceived because...never mind. We just know."

Angel knew that Gideon didn't want to talk about what had happened immediately after Mattie's conception, a time when he had almost given up hope of ever seeing his family again.

Sarah nodded. "Then she needs to stay inside Demon for at least another four weeks, and preferably six or eight weeks. Basically, the longer she can stay in the womb, the stronger she'll be and the better her chances of survival."

Alwyn sighed deeply. "I will do my best." He turned to Matt, and asked, "Can you live without your wife for that long? One month, or perhaps two, if we can manage it?"

Angel switched her gaze to Matt, who nodded as he said, "We'll get by. I'll find a way to explain to Marcus." He turned and looked at Angel, as she sat on the couch holding the little boy, who was by now fast asleep in her arms. Matt smiled sadly, a smile that nearly broke Angel's heart as he said, "Marcus will miss his mother. They talk a lot through their link. He'll miss that."

Angel tried to smile back at Matt, but she was distracted by a deep sigh from Alwyn. The Mage said sadly, "That is something Demon will never share with her daughter."

Both Angel and Matt stared at the Mage, and Matt's voice rose again as he said, "What do you mean? Why won't Deborah share a link with Mattie?"

Alwyn shook his head again, saying, "The state of consciousness that Demon must maintain for the next few weeks will not allow that mental link to develop and grow, as it would otherwise have done at this stage in her pregnancy. Removing the child early--from her mother's womb Untimely ripp'd--will almost certainly sever whatever bond might be left between them. Demon will never link to her daughter and Matthew..." The Mage paused and reached out to lay his hand on Gideon's shoulder, trying to give him strength to bear what he must. "Demon will never have another child. You heard what Sarah said. Her ovaries were damaged beyond repair, and removed. We will save this child for her, as she will never bear another."

Angel swallowed, wondering how Demon would feel when she found out. She almost smiled at the faith in Alwyn this thought demonstrated. ['When' Demon finds out, not 'if'. Definitely 'when'.]

Matt nodded, keeping his eyes on the floor. Angel knew he was suffering badly, but he was too proud to share his grief at that moment. Perhaps later he could accept her support and her help, but for now, all she could do to relieve his pain was to take care of Marcus.

Gideon's voice came out in a whisper. "Do whatever you have to, Alwyn, just save them both. We'll find a way to live with the consequences, just make sure that Deborah is with me to face them."

Alwyn nodded, then turned and kissed Sarah, saying, "I'd better get started. Join me when you can." He swept out of the waiting room, leaving the others gaping at his back.

Sarah tugged on Matt's arm, dragging him back to a seat. Once she had him sitting again, she took his hand and squeezed it as she said, "If Alwyn says he can do something, he will. Hang onto that, Matt. Everything's going to be all right." She gazed over at Angel and tried to smile encouragingly.

Angel felt a bubble of anger starting to swell within her at Sarah's words, and she wasn't in the least surprised when Matt exploded from his seat, yelling, "No, it won't be all right! It will never be all right again, until Galen is dead. Don't you see that, Sarah?"

He gazed down at the doctor's dark, beautiful face, and Angel could see the pain and confusion Sarah felt. The doctor whispered, "Matt..." but before she could go on, Angel interrupted, speaking for the first time since she had wakened.

"No, Sarah. Matt's right. As long as Galen is alive, Demon will be in danger. He has to die. We have to kill him." The young witch rose gracefully from her couch, carefully holding Marcus' head against her shoulder as she walked over to where the little boy's father stood, his anger still clearly showing on his face. "But not today. Today we need to focus on life, not death."

She smiled up at Matt, "Here, take Marcus. He's going to need his Daddy over the next few weeks."

Matt reached out and took the sleeping child, cradling him gently. The smile he gave Angel sent a wave of pleasure rushing through her, and she warned herself sternly that this was not the

time to let her feelings for her brother-in-law rise to the surface. For now, they all had to focus on getting Demon well again, and making sure Mattie survived.

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