

The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn - Part 3: Present Perfect

by [The Space Witches](#)

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John and Matthew prepare to bare arms...uh, bear arms.

Chapter 2

Gideon was awakened by a tickling sensation on his chest and thigh. He stretched lazily and realised that Deborah was licking his chest, concentrating her attentions on his left nipple. He could also feel her hand sliding along his thigh, her objective obvious. He smiled at the sensation and the rush of warmth to his groin this produced, as he lay back wishing that every day started like this. If it did he would be in a much better mood for the rest of the day. He also realised that he'd slept right through since they'd returned to her rooms after their late night snack and one final bout of lovemaking, not waking once in the intervening period; another contribution to the positive start to the day.

He opened his eyes slowly and looked at the door to the bedroom, which had been left slightly ajar. The light coming through indicated that the sun was well up and that they ought to get up and join the others for breakfast, but for the moment at least, he was content to lie back and enjoy the results of Deborah's activities. Gideon moved his left arm around her and stroked the length of her spine, causing her to shudder and squirm against his side. Deborah's head started to move gradually down his chest

to his stomach and he felt his cock stiffening in response.

"I believe you wanted to see me, Captain? I know it has taken me some time to respond to your request, but I've been involved in a particularly delicate experiment." The door was flung wide and a voice echoed around the room.

Gideon grabbed the sheet and managed to pull it up to cover him and Deborah as the voice continued. "I've never been entirely satisfied with my dragons you know. The color and size are perfect..."

"Alwyn." Gideon tried to interrupt.

"But they lack substance. My holodemons, on the other hand..."

"Alwyn."

"Have perfect form and substance, but lack the color and size, so I've been trying to combine the two and..."

"ALWYN!"

Alwyn paused. "You don't have to shout, you know. I may not be as young as I used to be, but I do still have all my faculties. Now where was I? Oh yes, my dragons."

Gideon butted in before the spate of words could start again. "Alwyn, what are you doing here?"

Alwyn looked down at Gideon from his position at the foot of the bed. Gideon and Deborah had pulled themselves up until they were sitting with their backs against the headboard, both still clutching the sheet. Alwyn's eyebrows shot up. "Well, I was told you wanted to see me. If that was incorrect, then I'll leave and go back to my experiments." He started to turn back to the door.

Gideon spoke quickly. "No, wait. I do want to see you, but when I asked what you were doing here, I didn't mean here on this planet. I meant here, in my bedroom, at the foot of my bed."

Alwyn's eyebrows rose even further. "*Your* bed? That's very presumptuous of you, Captain. Surely this isn't *your* bed, unless this delightful young lady has gifted you with all her possessions?" Before Gideon could respond, Alwyn turned to Deborah, who was watching the exchange with some amusement. "I must apologize, my dear. The Captain should have introduced us, but I'm afraid the manners of the military these days are quite deplorable. You, I assume, are the chief of the witches, the infamous Demon? I am Alwyn, at your service, madam." He bowed slightly at the waist.

Deborah smiled wryly at this comment and replied, "I hadn't realised I was infamous, but yes, I'm Demon, and I'll ask the same question as Matthew did: What are you doing in my bedroom?"

Alwyn looked surprised, as if it should have been obvious. "Looking for him, of course." He pointed at Gideon. "You don't think I make a habit of bursting into ladies' bedrooms for no reason, do you? I was told he needed to speak to me urgently, and I was told he was here..."

"Alwyn."

"So here I am, too. I really don't see the need for these completely irrelevant questions, to which the answers should be entirely obvious if either of you were paying attention to a word I was saying..."

"*Alwyn!* Let's not start this again! I *do* want to see you, but I hadn't expected room service. Maybe next time you could knock? And this is a big place; I'm damn sure that no one told you exactly which room I was in, so how the hell did you know where to find me?" Gideon's exasperation was beginning to show.

Alwyn's expression was smug. "Trade secret. You don't seriously expect me to explain all the things a Technomage can do?"

Gideon felt Deborah tense as she sat beside him, still clutching the sheet to her neck. He turned to her quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't know he was coming. I'd have warned you if I had."

Deborah nodded. "I appreciate that." She turned to look at Alwyn, her face showing no expression. "If you're a Technomage, then you may not be welcome in my home, and certainly not in my bedroom. My experiences with members of your order to date have not been entirely pleasant."

Gideon winced at the cold tone of her voice and the way Alwyn started to draw himself up to respond. He wondered how he could get control of this situation. From the moment Alwyn had walked through the door, he'd felt as if he were on a roller coaster, plunging out of control. He cut in before Alwyn could reply. "OK. Stop there. Time out. Alwyn, would you wait a few minutes while we get dressed, then I can introduce you two properly and explain why I need to see you?"

Alwyn nodded. "Of course. I'm a patient man. I can wait." He sat down on the end of the bed and smiled at the couple.

The silence lengthened.

Gideon tried again. "I meant could you wait outside? In there?" He pointed to the living room. "Or on the terrace?"

Alwyn's eyebrows rose again. "Are you shy, Captain? I can assure you that there's nothing either of you can show me that I haven't seen before."

Gideon shook his head. "Just wait outside, will you?"

Alwyn rose and left the room, muttering about false modesty as he went. Gideon turned to Deborah again and was relieved to see she was smiling. She lifted her hand to his face and pulled him into a kiss. "Good morning, Matthew. Now where was I?" She flicked back the sheet and started moving her head down his body.

Gideon laughed and grabbed her hair, pulling back gently. "Much as I'd like to let you carry on, I don't think we have time. And the thought of doing it while Alwyn is in the next room doesn't fill me with enthusiasm, either." He pulled her close and kissed her thoroughly. "But I'll expect you to pick up exactly where you left off sometime soon. Now, let me explain about Alwyn." He gave her a summary of his previous contact with the Technomage and why he needed to see him now. Deborah listened carefully, without interruption, until he'd finished.

She sat quietly, considering for a moment. "So he's another rogue Technomage. Is he going to hate us as much as Galen does?"

Gideon shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe we should go and find out. If he does, I'll arrange to

meet him when I get back to the Excalibur and get him out of here as soon as I can. And while we're on the subject, I saw Galen yesterday." He paused at her quick intake of breath. "Calm down. I saw him on his ship. He's only going to stay long enough to let me know when Lucas's ship arrives, then he's leaving. He'll come back when I call him to take us back to the Excalibur. Can you live with that?"

Deborah nodded and pushed back the sheet. "I don't think I have a lot of choice. Let's go find out how much damage this one can do to us."

Gideon winced at the words and the tone. She might have forgiven him for bringing Galen, but she hadn't forgotten, and he couldn't help being irritated that his plans for the next hour or so, which had involved a long and energetic soak in Deborah's tub, had been derailed. [Maybe this evening.] He grinned as he followed her into the bathroom, saying, "You know, it's a damn good job he arrived when he did. Another five minutes and it could have been *really* embarrassing."

"You know what amazes me most about Lily?" John suddenly asked.

Luke turned in John's embrace to face him. It was morning, and they'd been lying together spoon-style in Lily's bed. A while earlier Lily had left for the bathroom. "I'm slowest, so I get to go first," she had said with a grin and slipped out of bed. Both men's eyes had followed her as she'd walked towards the bathroom, and when she had disappeared inside, they'd looked at each other and smiled knowingly. Lily had wanted to give them some time alone together, to reinforce their bond after their four-month separation. Now that Sarah Chambers was here, Luke knew that as he'd studied and analyzed the Vorlon medical equipment as thoroughly as possible under the circumstances, he would probably be involved in discussions about the ongoing search for a cure to the plague. Lily had known that she would therefore have some time alone with John somewhere along the line, and she'd obviously wanted to give Luke the same chance.

When Lily had left them, Luke had reached out and run his fingers through John's beautiful black hair, something he loved but only rarely had the opportunity to do. When he'd proceeded to trace the young Asian's jaw, he'd found the palm of his hand being kissed softly while John covered it with his own hand. Almost involuntarily, Luke's thumb had traced the outline of those soft lips, which had opened slightly, drawing him like a magnet. He'd ended up closing his hand around John's neck, pulling him closer as he'd bent forward, covering his mouth with his own, all too aware of the heat racing through his veins and the intense look in the dark brown eyes boring into his lighter brown. From there, things had really gotten going, at times becoming almost frighteningly intense.

They'd been lying there together in the afterglow, enjoying the early morning peace and each other's company, cuddling wordlessly, when John suddenly spoke.

Luke looked at his friend and lover silently, waiting for him to continue.

"We assume that she's in her early to mid-twenties," John murmured, absent-mindedly looking over Luke's shoulder towards the fireplace.

Luke nodded. None of the sisters knew their exact age anymore, since they hadn't been able to determine exactly how long they had been in stasis in the castle.

After another moment John continued. "From what little she and her sisters told us, we know that the Vorlon treated them like lab rats, punishing them whenever they didn't obey. That must have left

terrible emotional and mental wounds. Sometimes I can feel an echo of the pain they caused her when I touch Lily's mind." He briefly pressed his lips together.

Luke knew that if the Vorlon ever came back, John would fight them to his death before letting them hurt Lily--or her sisters--again. As would he.

John's eyes narrowed slightly. "Despite what she went through, she is very calm and self-assured. Yet she isn't 'all work and no play', either. She shows her feelings openly where others tend to hide them to cover up their insecurities. It isn't just a façade. She is more at peace with herself than most other people I know, younger or older than her."

Luke let his gaze wander to the bathroom door as he thought this over. "You're right," he answered softly. "Lily is self-centered in the best sense of the word, which allows her to be more open and direct, despite the loss of most memories from the time before her abduction by the Vorlon. On the other hand, it might have been just that loss which helped her retain, or regain, a certain child-like innocence and wonder. Her beliefs have helped Lily to accept the loss, and move on, instead of dwelling on the past at the cost of the present and future."

John finally met Luke's eyes. "Yes. That's exactly what I feel from her." After a few moments he turned onto his back to gaze at the bathroom door, then murmured, "I know this may sound strange, but for her personal development, despite the pain and loss, being abducted by the Vorlon might just have been one of the best things that could happen to her, after all." He gave Luke a wry grin. "And certainly to us."

Luke smiled his understanding. "How did we ever manage without her?"

When Gideon and Demon emerged, they found Alwyn on the terrace, looking out over the courtyard and surrounding countryside. He turned as they stepped out through the French windows and smiled. "This is a very beautiful planet. Don't let Earthforce know about it or they'll probably want to come and strip-mine it."

Gideon protested. "Now that's not fair. I helped you stop them on Regula IV, didn't I?"

Alwyn twisted his mouth into a cynical smile. "Just because I found one Earthforce Captain with a conscience doesn't mean I place any faith in the rest."

He took a deep breath and turned to Demon. "I understand why you wouldn't welcome me with open arms, my dear. I'm afraid that young Galen has some rather ill-founded opinions on certain matters. He really can't help it, you know. His teacher was a strict traditionalist and taught Galen to be the same. I, on the other hand, am much more open-minded. I take people as I find them and so far what I find is a beautiful woman made more beautiful by her condition."

Demon smiled at him. "Only the very best butter, eh? Matthew tells me he needs your help and you are therefore welcome as a guest in our home. We're meeting the others in the dining room, so you're welcome to join us for breakfast, too."

Alwyn nodded his head. "Who could refuse such a gracious invitation? Lead the way, dear lady. Lead the way."

Demon held Gideon's hand tightly as they left her rooms. She didn't trust this new Technomage. His words sounded reasonable, but would his actions match them? She decided to bide her time and see how he behaved before arriving at a conclusion. She listened as Gideon explained to Alwyn what help he needed as they walked. When they reached the tapestry room, Alwyn stopped to look and ask questions. Demon answered his questions warily but honestly. They stopped in front of a large tapestry that showed the glowing white figure of a Vorlon at the centre. Alwyn drew in his breath.

"That is a work of art. May I ask who the artist is?"

Demon smiled. "My sisters Lily and Ilas will be pleased to hear you compliment their work."

Alwyn looked carefully at the tapestry. "It was the usual guise the Vorlon took to deceive the innocent. It was a beguiling appearance and made many races feel warmly towards them. Do you have such feelings?" He turned and asked Demon.

She considered before replying. "Yes and no. Yes, in that they brought us together and helped us develop abilities that otherwise would have remained latent in us. Without them, I would have lived and died on Earth, never knowing my sisters Lily and Ilas. No, in that they caused us so much pain in bringing out those abilities and punished us when we refused to be their slaves."

Alwyn nodded. "A balanced answer. No race or individual is all good or bad. Now, where is that breakfast you promised me?"

Demon smiled and led the way to the dining room.

A few seconds later Deborah stopped suddenly, taking a deep breath.

Gideon was immediately concerned. "What's the matter? Are you OK?" He put his arm around her shoulders and swung her round to face him. She smiled at him as she placed her hands on her belly.

"I'm fine. It's just that recently this little monster has taken to using the inside of his mother as a punching bag in the mornings." Gideon looked down as she moved her hands away and was stunned to see that her abdomen was moving under her dress. He could actually see where the movement of the child was causing ripples across her belly.

"Does it hurt?" He couldn't imagine how it wouldn't. Remembering the first time he'd felt the baby move, it finally dawned on him how much it had grown since then and how tightly cramped inside her the child must be. Gideon suddenly wondered if all the sexual activity they'd indulged in since his arrival had been such a good idea. But Raven had said that she'd know her own body and Deborah had been as eager as he had.

He became aware that Alwyn was peering over his shoulder. "May I?" The Technomage moved round Gideon and placed his hand over Deborah's bump, saying, "I've been on so many backwoods planets with few medical facilities that I've become quite a competent mid-wife over the years."

Gideon watched as Alwyn looked closely at Deborah's stomach while moving his hand gently over her. "Well, he is a lively one, isn't he? I don't think he's going to want to stay in there much longer, my dear." He straightened and turned back to Gideon. "Now did someone say something about breakfast? One could die of starvation around here."

As they walked to the dining room, Alwyn considered what he'd seen. His enhancements allowed him to see the baby in the womb quite clearly and he was concerned at the size of it. Both Demon and Gideon were tall, even if neither were heavy-boned, but the child was already at the size most babies would achieve at birth, and Galen had told him that she still had another four weeks to go. The baby would grow further and could gain another kilo or so of weight in that time. He looked down at Demon's hips. While they were well rounded, her pelvis wasn't wide. If the child grew much larger, it wouldn't fit through. Alwyn wondered if her doctor had told her that she would probably need a caesarean.

They arrived in the dining room to find the others all assembled and eating. Demon looked around and thought that she'd never seen so many happy faces assembled in one place.

Lily sat between Luke and John, having to sit back from the table because her belly wouldn't let her get closer. As this meant that she couldn't reach for food, the two men were competing to see who could anticipate her needs soonest. They were spoiling her outrageously and Lily was lapping up every minute of it.

Max was the centre of attention on the other side of the table, and enjoying himself even more than Lily. Ilas gazed at him adoringly and hung on his every word. Dureena wasn't as obvious, but her affection for him was clear. She sat back a little from the table, one foot resting on the side of Max's chair as he regaled them with stories of the magnificent work he'd done since he'd last seen them.

Sarah Chambers sat slightly removed, but was smiling, listening, and observing the interplay of personalities around her. Demon felt slightly sorry for her, the only single person in a group full of happiness and sexual tension. This made her think of how Angel had been at the start of the last visit from the Excalibur crew. She pushed those thoughts away quickly.

She listened as Gideon introduced Alwyn to everyone. Demon hadn't realized that none of them had met him, either. Apparently only Gideon and Galen had.

They sat and ate as Gideon outlined the reason for their visit. He gave brief details of the message and their plans for surprising Lucas when he arrived. Demon wondered about the source of the message. Who would have sent that warning to Matthew? Who knew that he would care? Her stomach fluttered at one possible answer, but she dismissed it instantly. Angel was too far under Lucas's influence to betray him like that, and she loved him too much, anyway.

When everyone had finished eating, Gideon summed up their plans for the day.

"So, Max. You plan to take Dureena and Ilas back to those ruins to see if you can find anything else there?"

Max nodded. "Now that we're here, we may as well do a little more scratching around. I'm sure Dureena can find some more interesting holes to crawl into. I'll ask Galen to give us a lift to the site." Demon stiffened again, but forced herself to relax. She'd said that the Technomage could stay as long as he stayed on his ship, but if Ilas and Dureena were going on board, he'd better stay out of their way, or they might just take a couple of pieces of his anatomy as souvenirs. Demon smiled at the thought of how they would mount and display such items.

Gideon turned to Luke. "And you're going to show Alwyn and Sarah the infirmary?" Luke nodded as Gideon turned to Sarah. "Could you bring Alwyn and Luke up to speed on the progress you've made on the viral screen and explain what's needed now? I've given Alwyn an overview, but you can go through the technical stuff with him."

Sarah agreed and rose from her chair, quickly followed by Luke and Alwyn. Pausing only for Luke to kiss Lily goodbye, they left the room, immediately followed by Max, Ilas, and Dureena. Gideon turned to Demon and kissed her cheek.

"John and I have a meeting with your Guard Captain. We'll be training the guards in weapons use in the courtyard for the rest of the day. See you later." He rose and walked to the door, followed closely by Matheson.

They stopped as Demon spoke. "And what are Lily and I supposed to do with ourselves?" She raised her eyebrows but kept her face otherwise expressionless. The two men had turned to look at her. They stood side by side, both with legs slightly apart and arms crossed, both dressed in black pants and gray t-shirts, both grinning broadly.

Gideon pointed. "*You*, get to rest. That's what knocked-up trollops do with themselves."

Demon chuckled. "Knocked-up trollops, are we? And whose fault is that? We may have been trollops for years, but we weren't knocked-up until a certain star ship parked itself upstairs, and the Captain and First Officer came down and ravished us."

Gideon's arms unfolded and his hands moved to his hips. "Ravished?" He turned to Matheson. "John, do you remember ravishing anyone while we were here?"

Matheson shook his head. "No, sir. No ravishing here. That was scheduled for our next stop. We had this planet scheduled for looting and pillaging. No ravishing."

Gideon turned back to look at Demon and Lily, who were both sitting back in their chairs watching the men in the doorway.

"See? We schedule our ravishing very carefully. Don't want to turn up at a planet and find there's no one suitable to ravish. It gets hard on the local wildlife. So if there was any ravishing going on here, I think that we were the ravished, not the ravishers. Right John?"

"Absolutely, Captain. I made a note in my personal log. 'Eriadne - nice planet, good sunsets, got ravished.' I remember it clearly."

Demon stood and moved in front of Gideon, who pulled her close. She could see out of the corner of her eye that Matheson had swept Lily up into his arms. Gideon squeezed his arms around his lover and sighed.

Demon asked. "What's the sigh for?"

Gideon nodded at John and Lily. Lily lay back in John's arms as he kissed her passionately. "I wish I could do that with you."

Demon laughed. "You'd break your back if you tried." She flowed against him and put her arms round

his neck. He pulled her as close as her swollen belly would allow, and kissed her slowly and for a long time.

When they broke for air, he pushed her away. "I'm late for that meeting, and I really don't want to arrive with a hard-on. So let me be and go rest up. I'll see you later."

Demon watched as John lowered Lily to the floor and the two men left. She turned to Lily and said, "Well, if we're supposed to rest, let's go rest on my terrace. The view could be interesting." They left the dining room laughing together.

Matheson and Gideon walked toward the courtyard. Matheson pondered whether he should raise a subject that had been worrying him and decided this would be a good moment. "Captain?"

Gideon looked round at him and stopped walking. He gestured for Matheson to continue.

"Have you considered what will happen if Lucas brings Angel with him? How are we going to stop her freezing us all into place like she did before?"

Gideon's expression turned grim. "It's difficult. There are only two things I can think of. One is that we line up so many troops that she *can't* freeze them all, and the second is that we arm her sisters. They're the only ones not affected by her. I don't want to do that, I don't want them anywhere near that courtyard when we spring the trap."

Matheson nodded. "So we'll just have to overwhelm her."

Lily and Demon had brought chairs to the edge of the terrace and sat looking over the balustrade, down into the courtyard. Gideon and Matheson stood below with around twenty Brakiri. Having split them into two groups, Gideon was taking one group through the assembly and workings of a standard hand PPG, while Matheson showed the other group the PPG rifle. Each of the Brakiri had his or her own weapon and was handling it gingerly.

Lily turned to Demon and spoke softly. "Do you think they've worked out yet that our 'guards' are really just men from the village?"

Demon nodded. "I think they're finding that out just about now, but Nikarran is much more professional. He's read all the books he could find in the library, and he's done his best to train the other men. He and Matthew do seem to get on well together." She nodded her head towards the area below, where Gideon was laughing as he slapped the Guard Captain on the back.

They continued to watch as the guards put down their PPGs and went to set up targets for practice. They were using the standard targets that they used for practicing their crossbow skills. They carefully set them up at one end of the courtyard then assembled at the far end, collecting their weapons on the way.

Demon sat upright. "This could get interesting. I wonder if Matthew and John realize what material they use in those targets?" She turned and grinned at Lily. "Do you think we should tell them?"

Lily giggled. "No. It'll be much more fun to watch them find out."

Both women leaned forward in their seats, resting their arms along the balustrade, with their chins on their hands. They watched the scene below carefully.

Gideon moved down the courtyard to stand near to the targets, off to one side, as Matheson showed the first Brakiri how to stand and aim his weapon. Helping him align the sights on the target, John stepped back and watched as the guard fired the PPG rifle. It was a perfect shot that hit the target cleanly, a fact demonstrated by the explosion of the target into a ball of flame, which emitted a thick, black smoke. Gideon disappeared inside the cloud of smoke completely, his location only apparent from his loud coughing.

Gideon found that he couldn't see a thing. The thick smoke blocked his sight, stung his eyes, and was choking him. He staggered forward, waving his arms to clear the smoke away, and emerged from the cloud to see John running toward him from the far end of the courtyard and a bonfire burning nearby. He realised that the bonfire had been the target moments earlier.

Coughing loudly, he leaned on John's arm as his First Officer reached him. "Captain? Are you all right, Captain?"

Gideon nodded, trying to catch his breath. "I'm fine," he croaked, "Just fine. What the hell happened?"

Nikarran had arrived on his other side and helped John to help him stand. The Guard Captain looked embarrassed. "I hadn't realised the type of weapon you had given us. I thought they were some form of projectile weapon. The targets are made of compacted straw, which is the perfect material for stopping projectiles. What are these things?" He waved around the PPG he held.

Matheson answered as Gideon was still coughing. "Plasma Propelled Gas. It's a very hot ball of gas. In space, we can't use projectiles, because they penetrate walls, which can lead to explosive decompression. So we use these instead, but the hot gas must have hit the dry straw in the target and..."

Gideon stopped coughing long enough to look up to the terrace where he could see Deborah and Lily sitting. The two women were curled up in helpless laughter, tears streaming down their faces.

Gideon turned to John. "They knew. They knew that was going to happen and they didn't say a word. When I get hold of Deborah, I'm going to put her over my knee and... hell, that's no good, she'd just enjoy it."

He started to laugh. Matheson and Nikarran joined in and the three men walked back up the length of the courtyard to stand under the terrace. Gideon looked up as Deborah stood and leaned over the balustrade.

"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?" Gideon placed his hand over his heart as he quoted, grinning up at his lover.

Deborah laughed and leaned forward. "You look more like Othello than Romeo. Here—catch. Your face is dirty."

He stretched and caught the handkerchief she'd dropped and used it to wipe his face. The linen came away black and Gideon realized that his face must have been covered in soot. He looked up and smiled. "I suppose you think that's funny, don't you?"

Deborah grinned back down at him. "Oh, yes. Keep the handkerchief. You can wear it as your lady's favor. It's about the right color for me by now."

Gideon looked down at the handkerchief and saw that she was right. It was now more or less completely black. He held it up and waved it. "For the Dark Lady." He tucked it into his belt and grinned back up at her.

She leaned on her elbows and blew him a kiss. "That's supposed to be tied around your armor."

"Sorry, it's down at the blacksmith's getting the rust filed off."

He saw that John was now looking up at Lily, who had joined Deborah in leaning on her elbows and looking down at the men below. John asked, "So where's mine, then? If he gets one, I want one, too!"

Both men watched as Lily removed a green ribbon from her hair and dropped it down to Matheson. He caught it as it fell and kissed it gently before tying it to his belt.

Gideon and Matheson turned back to see that the Guard Captain had arranged for the crossbow targets to be removed and was organizing some alternatives.

Demon and Lily sat back in their chairs, watching as the Brakiri brought out a table, which they recognized as coming from the servants' hall. Then the guards went back indoors and a few moments later emerged with the objects they obviously meant to use as targets.

Both women sat upright quickly. Demon whispered. "Oh no. Oh dear. That's going to cause trouble."

Lily started giggling. "Well, at least they won't explode."

Demon stood. "I think we had better go and explain to the cook why all his best pots and pans are being used for target practice and give him some help with preparing lunch. Otherwise I don't think anyone round here is going to eat again today."

They left her rooms hurriedly, heading for the kitchens.

As Lily and Demon passed through the hallway where the main group of tapestries hung, Lily watched as Demon paused. She always came to a halt at the same spot, in front of the tapestry showing the events of the Excalibur's last visit to Eriadne. The first impression on the viewer was the color—gray. Everything was kept in monochrome tones from white, through grays to black, and it was also slightly blurred, as if seen through tears, creating a very subdued atmosphere.

The image was dominated by a large tree that went from the bottom to the top of the tapestry, with smaller images nestling in its branches. The first one on the bottom left showed Max, Ilas, and Dureena—both women pregnant—at the ruins, where they had found the information that had proven

so critical in the fight against the plague. One branch up, a little platform could be seen, carrying a small bundle that held the body of Dureena's baby. She had chosen the traditional way of her people to rest the dead. On the top right, Matthew and a pregnant Demon could be seen on the fly bike between two branches—Demon's retelling of that story had caused a lot of laughter among the women.

Below, John, Luke, and Lily, with her already enormous belly, stood under a branch with Devi the Bat flying over their heads. But in between the uppermost branches, all hope and humor was forgotten. A man could be seen, a man with his face obscured, carrying the unconscious Angel up the ramp of Galen's shadow-like ship.

The biggest picture, though, was embedded in the tree's roots, and showed Luke Raven's face, his warm eyes looking out at the viewer calmly. It commemorated his decision to stay on Eriadne, and the hope and love it expressed created a counterbalance to the pain and despair in the picture of Angel's abduction.

Demon then moved to another tapestry, the one showing Demon and Angel being taken by the Vorlon. Lily watched in silence as Demon's hand went out to touch the image of her sister.

Lily spoke quietly. "What if Lucas brings Angel with him? What shall we do?"

Demon turned and looked at Lily, biting her lip uncertainly. "I don't know. I hope he doesn't."

Lily looked at her in shock. Demon had missed her sister so badly in the last four months that she'd almost made herself ill with her loss. How could she say she didn't want Angel to return? Lily had to understand. "How can you say that?"

Demon took a deep breath. "If Angel comes back, do you know what will happen?"

Lily shook her head.

"One of two things. Maybe she'll help Lucas. If she uses her power, she could hurt Matthew, John, Luke, or any of the others we care about. I'm sure she wouldn't mean to, but it could happen, and I couldn't bear it if she did. Or maybe, if she doesn't use her power, then Matthew will capture her and Lucas. He'll charge Lucas with the murder of Dureena's child and Angel with being an accessory. He'll take them away and have them prosecuted, and if they're found guilty, do you know what they'll do?"

Lily shook her head again.

"They'll mind-wipe them. They claim that it's more merciful, that it doesn't kill the body, but allows the criminal to provide a service to society to make restitution for their crimes. But Angel will be gone. Her body will still be walking around, but my sister will be dead."

By now, the tears were streaming down Demon's face as she touched the image of her sister again. "And how will I forgive Matthew for having done that to her?"

Lily grasped her hand and held it tightly. "You've got to stop him, Demon! You can't let him capture Angel if that's what will happen."

Demon shook her head. "I can't. He made a promise. He promised Dureena he'd bring the killers of her child to justice. I can't make him break that promise, and Dureena's not the forgiving kind. She's not likely to let him off the hook."

She wiped the tears from her face and pulled her shoulders back. Taking a deep breath, she composed herself and turned back to Lily. "So I hope Angel doesn't come with Lucas. Perhaps he's left her safe and well, somewhere she can live the rest of her life in peace. I've resigned myself to never seeing her again. It's the only way I have any hope that she might be happy."

When John returned to Lily's room in the late afternoon, he found her sleeping in the lounging pit, curled up on her left side as much as her enormous belly would allow. He sat down on the steps of the pit, looking at her still form, her hair that flowed over the pillows and her shoulders and arms, her delicate features. He could feel his love for her surge up inside, and had to take a deep breath before it could overwhelm him.

Lily stirred, her eyebrows twitching, eyes moving behind her closed lids, and murmured something he couldn't understand, but her features relaxed again after a few seconds. John frowned. When he and Gideon had come to the dining room to grab a quick snack for lunch, both Demon's and Lily's mood had been subdued. Matthew had noticed that Demon had to make an effort to act cheerful, while he had been glad Lily had eaten at all! But what could have caused such a drastic mood swing? When the two women had been sitting on Demon's terrace, watching their men train the guards earlier, they had been all giggles.

John shook his head. He wasn't as sooty as Matthew--a smile still appeared on his face when he remembered the little 'incident'--but he really needed to take a shower after spending most of the day in the sunny courtyard. He went down on his knees and leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on Lily's forehead, then silently got up and walked towards the bathroom.

When he emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his hips and feeling fresh and clean again, John found Lily kneeling in the lounging pit, stretching and yawning. When she saw him, a smile spread on her lips, but that was soon interrupted by another big yawn.

"Did I wake you up?" John asked as he sat down on the edge of the pit. Lily crawled toward him on all fours and offered him her mouth, inviting him to kiss it, which he did gladly.

When he finally broke away, Lily shook her head and sat back on her heels, her hands slipping into his. "No. And even if you did, I wouldn't mind. Waking up and seeing you is a scarce enough event that it's worth a little lack of sleep." She looked at him adoringly, and John could feel his cock twitch at the way she took in his body. Her eyes returned to his, and she said, "Not that I complain about Luke," smiling, her eyes and voice full of love as she said her other lover's name, and John smiled back at her instinctively, "but I--we--just aren't complete when you're not here."

"I know." John lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them softly. "I hope we'll find a way..." His voice failed as he remembered that he'd have to leave again in a few days, and he lowered his eyes. [How can I leave them again without it killing me?]

Lily smiled sadly and released her right hand from his to stroke his cheek. "We will. I know we will."

John stashed the sad thoughts away into some dark corner of his mind and smiled back at her. "Yes, we will." He drew her near and held her in his arms tightly, carefully, wanting to cherish every moment

he had with her.

Suddenly he could feel her mood change. She seemed somewhat absent and preoccupied. John leaned his head back to look at her; when Lily felt him move, she lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him curiously, but he could still feel that she wasn't entirely with him.

"What is it, Lily?"

Lily looked at him wide-eyed for a moment, then drew her breath in and withdrew from his embrace, sitting back on her heels again and tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear nervously as her eyes wandered off to the side. John noticed her other hand was resting on her belly, but it seemed an unconscious gesture, like rubbing her back every so often. She was chewing on the inside of her lip now, her forehead creased in concentration. John didn't want to push her, so he didn't say anything, but waited for her to find an answer. Finally his patience was rewarded when Lily looked at him again, searching his eyes with hers, and asked in a voice so soft he almost couldn't hear it, "Do you think Lucas will bring Angel with him?"

John frowned slightly. "You say that as if you don't want her to come back..." His voice trailed off as his brain kicked in, and suddenly the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Carefully watching Lily, he asked, "Do you know what the punishment would be if Angel were convicted of murder?"

Lily nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. "Demon told me," she breathed.

Of course! Both had been subdued at lunch, but it had been Demon who hadn't eaten anything--Angel's half-sister by blood. Lily and Luke had told him how Demon had made herself sick with missing Gideon and Angel and feeling guilty for what had happened to her sister. Demon must be missing her sister terribly, but it seemed as if all of the sisters had convinced themselves that it was better not to see Angel again, as the alternative was that she would be caught along with Lucas. They all knew that Gideon thought she was responsible for the death of Dureena's child and wanted to bring her before a court, despite their insistence that she wouldn't have brought Lucas back if she'd known the price. If Angel were convicted and mind-wiped, she wouldn't be their sister anymore. They had lost her in any case, but like this, at least she was still herself.

John's heart ached for them as he realized how hard this must be for the sisters, who had been so close, to have lost one of them permanently, knowing that she was out there somewhere but that coming back would probably be her undoing. He knelt down before Lily and lifted her hands to his lips, kissing them softly, then holding them to his naked chest, so she could feel his heart beating beneath her fingers.

"I wish I could do something to help you or Angel, but I can't work against Matthew, and he won't go back on the promise he gave to Dureena." He hesitated, remembering his conversation with Gideon in his quarters on the Excalibur on the day he'd given him the data crystal containing pictures of Lily. *"I'm going to track that girl down and put her in front of a court if it kills me,"* Gideon had said. John still didn't have any clue as to *why*. But maybe Lily did?

Lily felt his searching look. "What is it, John?" she asked, realizing that she had used the same words as he had earlier. He didn't notice.

She watched as he pressed his lips together and then said, "Promise me you won't tell anyone what I'll tell you now."

Lily's eyes narrowed as she tried to get a hint as to what this was about, then nodded. "Promise."

John took a deep breath, then said, "I'm worried about Matthew."

Lily looked at him, eyebrows creased, but waited for him to continue.

"Since we left here last time, I felt more and more that Matthew was obsessed with finding Angel. Sometimes to a point that he would forget that Lucas had also been involved in the death of Dureena's baby, and that he was probably responsible by misleading Angel." He shook his head and looked out the window while Lily listened, clearly stricken. "If only I could find out *why*. She may have mistreated him in the beginning, but it isn't like Matthew to be vindictive. There must be more to it."

John pressed his lips together as he searched for the right words, his eyes distant. "When he talks about her, Matthew emits an aura of anger, and guilt. Sometimes it's just simmering beneath the surface, other times it's strong enough that I have to strengthen my shields." His eyes searched Lily's, his concern for his Captain and friend touching her deeply. "What could have happened? Was it the time he spent in the Box? He says he doesn't have any clear memories, there was only darkness and strange visions, and I don't believe he would lie about that." He sighed, and Lily squeezed his hands.

She thought for a moment, then said, "Could you... would you share with me what you felt from him? I have a vague idea about what could be at least one reason for his behavior and this could help me confirm or discard it."

John thought for a moment. Usually he would never do this, but he knew Lily would never betray his trust. And she could possibly give him some hints that could help him help Matthew, and ultimately Angel too. He nodded and concentrated, linking with Lily. She could feel him merge with her, then suddenly a wave of anger and guilt hit her, and she gasped, eyes wide. John immediately broke contact and softly touched her face. "Are you OK? I'm sorry."

Lily shook her head, panting slightly. "No, I'm all right. It's not your fault, it's just... it was a bit of a shock." Her attention turned inwards as she tried to match Gideon's emotions with what she knew and what she suspected. John intently watched her face, frozen in a mask of concentration, until her eyes focused on him again after a few seconds.

"You're right, there is a lot of anger and guilt. The anger must at least in part be about what she did to Dureena, but not entirely, I think. Something in Angel just seems to set Gideon off, and vice versa." She mused a moment, then continued, "The guilt... You remember I told you that Demon felt guilty because she thought her taking Gideon from Angel caused her to fall under Lucas' influence? I think Gideon feels the same. That by choosing Demon and rejecting Angel, he drove Angel towards Lucas, so he feels he's also responsible for the death of Dureena's baby. Could it be that he feels by finding Angel and bringing her in front of a court, he can make up for that?" She frowned at John, a wry smile on her lips. "Do I make sense at all?"

John nodded slowly. "Perfectly." A conversation he had had with his Captain a short while after they had begun their search for a cure came to his mind.

Gideon had said, *"It's easier not to want forgiveness or to expect it. Just keep trying to fix the mistake so we don't have to ask. But you end up trying so hard to atone for one set of mistakes, you...you overcompensate and...make new ones, and then you can never break out of the cycle. You just keep going round and round. No way out. Nowhere to go."* It seemed that although Gideon had recognized this, he was still not immune to such behavior.

John pondered this for a while, then sighed, his chest heaving. "I think there may be something else, too. Do you remember the night we had dinner in Demon's rooms?" He watched as Lily bit her lip and nodded. It had been a wonderful evening that ended badly. "After Angel said that awful thing, Matthew followed her. We don't know what happened between them when he caught up with her. Did she ever tell you?"

Lily shook her head, so John continued, "I'm sure that Matthew would never have hurt her, but I've wondered whether something happened between them that night that proved the final straw for Angel, that finally drove her to Lucas. If there was something, only Matthew and Angel know about it." He was silent for a moment, then sighed again and took her hand in his. "I promised to tell him if I think he's being unfair to Angel. Please do the same. Maybe this way we can help him to break out of the cycle."

Lily smiled and nodded, then drew him into her arms and pressed her mouth on his in a passionate kiss. Suddenly she broke off and looked at him. "You know this is one reason I love you. Your compassion. Your loyalty. Your good heart."

John chuckled. "That was three reasons, actually."

Lily grinned. "Drat, now I've given myself away. And I thought I had it covered up well."

John raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I like to uncover you."

Lily's breathing became faster at the intense stare he gave her. "Well then, let's see if you manage to blow my cover."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn

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