

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

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Alwyn the Technomage

Chapter 4

Gideon was awakened by a tickling sensation on his chest and thigh. He stretched lazily and realized 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...

His eyes flicked open and he sat up abruptly, causing Deborah to fall backwards, coming to rest on her back. "Sorry. Just hold that thought one minute..." Gideon threw back the covers and leaped out of bed, rushing to the door of the bedroom. He turned the key in the lock then went back to the bed. He slid in beside his lover, pulling her upright, kissing her, then easing her head back down to where it had been a moment before. "OK, just pick up where you left off, will you?" He lay back on the pillows, his arms behind his head, enjoying the feeling of her lips smiling against his chest and her laughter vibrating against his ribcage. Deborah's hand slipped back to his thigh.

Sarah Chambers found herself the first to arrive in the dining room for breakfast. She was beginning to understand why her crewmates from the Excalibur found this place so irresistible. In addition to the attractions that the women provided for Matthew, John and Max, the place was run like an extremely

luxurious hotel. The room she'd been given was spectacular. The bathroom was a fantasy come true, with a bath so deep and wide that she could swim in it, as well as a shower that she could adjust to any force or temperature she desired. All she really needed was someone to share it with, but as the only available sleeping partner was Alwyn, Sarah decided that she could cope with abstinence.

It wasn't just the room. The food was wonderful, the wine fantastic and the service provided by the Brakiri servants was non-intrusive but excellent. To make the place completely perfect, at the end of a long day there was the pool to swim in. In the late afternoon of the previous day, Luke had given Sarah directions on how to find it. He'd assured her that skinny-dipping was the house rule, so she'd gladly indulged in a long lazy swim.

The previous day hadn't been all pleasure, however. She and Luke had talked about the plague, the discoveries they'd made so far and what they needed to do next. Fortunately, she'd brought all her data pads with her since she'd intended doing some studying on the field trip that she'd thought they were taking. Sarah grinned as she thought how much more comfortable their real destination was.

Helping herself to the food laid out on a sideboard in the dining room, she took her plate back to the large central table, thinking back on the previous day. Alwyn had mostly listened as she and Luke talked, but by the end of the day he'd had a pretty good idea of what they were up against, and had been cautiously optimistic about being able to help. Before going off for her dip, they'd agreed to continue their discussions today, on board Alwyn's ship, where he could more easily show them the data that he thought might help.

A good day had ended on a sour note. Matt had come to the dinner table alone and obviously distracted by the cause of Demon's absence. Sarah already knew that the Captain was a galactic champion at brooding and he'd put on a gold medal winning performance over dinner, not touching his food or even trying to join in the conversation. Alwyn had eventually left, muttering that he could find better company in the river below the castle, where the lifeforms were more gregarious. The comment had gone straight past Matt who didn't even seem to have noticed the Technomage's departure.

Sarah looked up from her breakfast as she heard movement and saw Matt and Demon entering the room, hand in hand. Whatever the problem had been, it must have been solved or at least shelved, as they both wore broad smiles and she could feel the sexual satisfaction oozing from every pore of their bodies. Their body language alone was enough to get them banned from any gathering that wasn't entirely adult.

Sarah smiled. "Good morning, Demon, Captain." She watched as the Captain helped Demon into her chair then turned to smile at Sarah.

"Oh, it is that, Sarah. It's a beautiful day. Did you sleep well?" Matt went to the sideboard and started loading two plates with food.

"I slept wonderfully, thank you. Did you get any sleep at all, Matt? You look as if something might have kept you up all night." Sarah did her best to look innocently curious.

Sarah heard Demon quietly laughing from the other side of the table and looked over to see that the tall blonde was wearing a wicked smile, looking straight at her, silently encouraging her to go on with her teasing. Sarah looked at Matt who brought the loaded plates back to the table and sat down next to Demon before he replied.

"You're quite right, I was up for most of the night. I seem to have this annoying itch that won't let me

sleep. I keep scratching it, but it won't go away." Sarah watched as he turned and kissed Demon on the cheek.

Demon's words were barely audible. "I think you're confusing an itch with a witch, but keep scratching."

Matt laughed before turning back to Sarah. "Seen anyone yet this morning? Or are they all still in bed? It's one of the curses of this place. It doesn't matter how early you get *up*, you never seem to get out of bed until late." He grinned across the table at her.

Sarah was laughing loudly as Luke, Lily and John entered, with Max, Ilas and Dureena on their heels. Alwyn was only seconds behind but somehow managed to elbow his way to the front of the line at the sideboard. By the time they were all seated and eating, Sarah had finished and was pondering going around again. She disciplined herself sternly. If she kept on eating at the rate she had since arriving, they'd need a crane to get her up the ramp of Galen's ship when they left. She sipped the local coffee and watched as Alwyn spoke quietly to the Captain, their words inaudible to the rest of the table. Matt nodded and cleared his plate before sitting back and addressing the table.

"Sorry to introduce a note of business, but I think we'd better go over the plans for the day." Gideon looked round at the group seated round the table. "First, some news. Alwyn just told me that Galen has left." He had his hand on Deborah's knee under the table and squeezed gently as he made the announcement. He heard her sigh of relief and went on. "There's nothing he could help us with that Alwyn can't do just as well, and he had other work to do."

He could see Max and John frowning, obviously wondering what had precipitated Galen's sudden departure. He hurried on before they could ask, turning to Alwyn. "I believe that you're taking Luke and Sarah down to your ship today?" Alwyn nodded.

"OK, here's the plan. We don't know when Lucas will arrive. It could be any time today, tomorrow, or if our informant was completely wrong, not at all, but we must assume the worst and work on the basis that it'll be today. Alwyn will be monitoring the system for jump points and will signal us when one opens and he has an ETA. We'll meet an hour before that ETA and then I want Alwyn, Max, Luke, Sarah, Deborah, Lily and Ilas to go straight to the infirmary. It's well inside the castle, and easily defensible. I'll send five guards along with you. You all stay there until John, Dureena or I come and get you. Is that clear?"

Gideon looked round at Deborah, catching her gaze and holding it. He got no response of any kind from her. Her eyes closed for a moment then reopened. She stared him down. [Damn it, I'll need to talk to Max and Luke about tying them down if necessary.] He went on with the briefing.

"Dureena and I will be around the courtyard with most of the guards. We'll take care of Lucas. John will be taking another group of guards to secure the ship." He looked around the group and got nods from all but the three sisters. All three had their eyes closed now and he could almost hear them plotting. Gideon looked at Matheson, wanting to ask him if he could listen in to whatever they were up to. John met his eyes and shook his head slightly, obviously as aware of what was going on as Gideon. The Captain decided he'd tackle it later and in private.

Having answered a number of questions from the group, he leaned back and looked around. "So what does everyone have planned until Lucas arrives? Max, whatever you get up to, make sure you stay

close to home." He looked round at the older man sitting across the table.

Gideon watched as Max squeezed Ilas' hand and looked down at her, saying, "Oh, I think that Ilas and I can find a few games to play." He smiled lasciviously down at her.

Ilas grinned back as she stood. "Sorry, Max. You'll have to play with yourself for a while." Gideon nearly choked on his coffee at the look on Max's face at that response, before Ilas continued, "I need to spend some time with my sisters."

The Captain turned to see that Deborah was standing. She bent down and kissed him, then said, "I'll see you at lunch."

She left the dining room with Lily and Ilas by her side. Gideon knew that they were up to something and was determined to find out what it was, but that could wait. He turned back to Max. "John, Dureena and I will be working with the guards all morning. Care to join us?"

Max stood and pulled his jacket off the back of the chair. "I can't think of anything more tedious than watching you three play soldiers. I'll take the opportunity to check out the library. I've not had chance to spend any time there until now."

Gideon nodded and watched as Max walked to the door. As he reached it, Gideon called after him. "Oh Max. The copies of 'Justine' and 'Juliette' are on the top shelf of the bookcase on the far right as you go in."

Max froze, then slowly turned back. "You seem to think that I only read one kind of book, Captain, and may I ask how you know exactly where those two books are?"

Gideon grinned. "Unlike you, Max, I've spent a lot of time in the library and just happened to notice them. Interesting that you recognized the titles, without me mentioning the author." Max started to turn away. Gideon called after him again. "I couldn't read them, they're originals and my 18th century French isn't up to it, but I'm sure that a man of your talents..." Max had disappeared through the door.

When Gideon looked back at the table, Chambers and Raven were struggling to suppress laughter while Dureena looked puzzled. Alwyn had one eyebrow raised and murmured that he ought to check out the library himself at some point, as he stood and swept out of the room with Chambers and Raven in his train. Dureena looked at Gideon and said, "Would someone care to explain what that was about?"

Gideon stood and grinned down at her. "Ask Max." He turned to Matheson who had tried to keep his face expressionless throughout the discussion. "And exactly what are you smirking at, Lieutenant? I would be truly horrified if I thought that a bright young officer like you, had come into contact with such corrupting influences, that you knew what Max and I were talking about."

Matheson looked up at him, eyes wide with innocence. "But you said that you didn't mind me borrowing any of the books in your quarters, Captain. So when I came across those books in translation, I thought that they were romantic love stories, perfectly suitable for an innocent, young, junior officer such as myself. Of course I didn't understand most of what was in them. I've kept meaning to ask if you'd explain it to me. You wouldn't mind would you, Captain? Or should I take them to Max and ask him to explain? I'd tell him that they were yours, of course. I'd hate to mislead

anyone." Matheson had his best 'butter wouldn't melt in his mouth' expression on his face.

Gideon closed his eyes and sighed. "I should know better by now, shouldn't I? OK, how much is this going to cost me?"

Matheson's grin went from ear to ear. "I get to lead the next two planetary landing parties."

Gideon protested. "Aw, come on John. You know I hate sitting upstairs minding the store."

Matheson's smile was pure malice. "So do I. Deal?"

Gideon shook his head. "Deal. Come on, we've got work to do."

Demon, Lily and Ilas sat on the terrace outside Demon's rooms, talking to each other through their link.

Demon sighed as she thought, [[Matthew's determined to protect us from Lucas and keep us hidden away. I tried to talk to him about it, but he won't budge. He thinks that because we're pregnant, we're vulnerable. And he said that if Lily and I were around, it would distract him and John.]]

Ilas flared immediately. [[That maybe true for you two; I mean you're both just about ready to drop, but why should I get locked away with you? I'm fit for a fight and just itching to get my hands around Lucas' neck! Gideon's letting Dureena stay in the courtyard for the fight, why not me? I have a stake in this as well you know; it was my child Lucas killed as much as it was Dureena's.]] Her eyes filled with tears as she remembered their loss.

Demon smiled sadly at her sister and reached for her hand, just as Lily did the same from the other side. [[I know that, darling, but I think Matthew sometimes forgets. He sees you as a woman and forgets that you were a father of that child. Lily and I don't want to be left out of this any more than you do.]]

Lily's mental agreement was fervent, so Demon went on. [[So we have to figure out a way of getting out of that infirmary and helping Matthew despite himself. And we have to work out what we're going to do if Lucas brings Angel with him.]] She looked sadly at her sisters as they linked hands around the table and three heads, one blonde, one red and one blue, drew together.

Gideon, John and Dureena stood in the Guard Captain's office with the plans of the castle and surrounding area spread across the table. Nikarran was with them, providing information and advice as required. They had their basic plans in place, which Gideon summarized.

"OK, it's likely that he'll bring his ship down in this area." He pointed to the flat plain below the castle. "There isn't any other suitable site within several miles of the castle and he won't be expecting any resistance. When Lucas leaves the ship, John and his team will be waiting here." Gideon pointed to a low hill about half a kilometer from the expected landing site. "You'll move in and secure the ship and pilot so that his escape route is cut off." He looked up at the other three and checked that they were all in agreement. They nodded.

"Dureena, Nikarran and I will be up here in the castle. We'll each have a group of twelve guards with us. That leaves nine for your team John, is that enough?"

Matheson nodded. "More than enough. There's a limit to how many people I can shield and to how many can force entry to a ship at the same time. I'll take four on board with me and leave five to secure the perimeter."

Gideon agreed then looked back down at the plans, pointing to three separate points around the courtyard. "Nikarran, Dureena and I will hold our teams here, here and here until Lucas has entered the courtyard with whatever forces he brings with him. He may come alone, he may bring some reinforcements, or he may bring Angel. Whichever he does, with nearly forty of us around the courtyard, we should be able to overwhelm them." He frowned down at the plans, then looked at the others.

"I can see two problems with all this. First we have to find a way to conceal Alwyn's ship, so they don't see it as they come into land. Second, we know that Lucas can somehow sense when people approach him. We need a way to block that, and the hell of it is, the only way I can think of to solve those problems involves the sisters."

Nikarran spoke, his deep, gravelly voice taking the others by surprise. He rarely volunteered comments, usually only speaking in response to a direct question. "Captain, if I may offer some advice?" Gideon nodded, looking curiously at the Brakiri Guard Captain who he'd come to like and respect during his visits to Eriadne.

Nikarran continued. "I have known these women for nearly six years now. They are strong, determined, intelligent and resourceful. If you exclude them from your plans they will find a way of their own to participate. Better to have them under your control and part of your plans, than out of control, doing what they think fit."

Gideon grinned. "I can't remember which general said, 'I'd rather have them inside the tent, pissing out, than outside the tent, pissing in.' but I think that sums up your advice doesn't it?"

Nikarran smiled back. "Picturesque, but accurate."

Gideon turned to Matheson and Dureena. "Are you OK with this? I know that Deborah wants to be involved and as much as I hate it, I don't see any alternative, but if you two have problems with bringing Lily and Ilas in on this..."

Dureena interrupted before he could finish. "Nikarran is right. If we don't bring Ilas into this she'll just find her own way."

Matheson nodded. "Same for Lily. Luke and I have been worrying about what she might do."

Gideon grimaced. "Then we'd better find them and tell them what we need. Any idea where they went?" The others shook their heads. "OK, I'll try Deborah's rooms first, and if they're not there, we split up and go looking for them." He raised his commlink and keyed the call sign for the comm. console in Deborah's rooms.

Demon met Gideon at the door to her rooms and held him back for a moment as Matheson, Dureena

and Nikarran continued through to the terrace. When they were alone she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, clinging to him. He returned the kiss with equal fervor and held her tightly. When they finally broke the kiss he looked at her curiously. "What was that for?"

She smiled at him. "Because I love you, and I don't think I've told you that today." Demon could see that her behavior puzzled Matthew, but she desperately needed to feel his kiss and his arms around her. What she and her sisters had planned could mean that he'd leave her and never come back. Demon knew that she was risking everything, but had no choice. She needed these last few hours before he might reject her forever. She looked deep into his eyes, seeing the warmth and passion there as he pulled her close again and kissed her forehead.

"No, you haven't. And I didn't tell you that I love you, too, but I do." Demon felt his arms tighten around her as he held her.

She leaned her head into his neck and whispered. "Do you have to rush off after we've talked? Could you spend some time with me?" She looked longingly at Matthew, praying that the answer would be yes, as this might be the last time she ever got to make love to him.

Matthew smiled at her. "I think I could manage that. Now let's join the others before they come looking for us."

Gideon walked out onto the terrace holding Deborah's hand, puzzled by her behavior. She'd never before asked for his time or attention, she'd always seemed confident that his desire for her would bring him to her as soon as he could. Why did she suddenly feel the need to ask him to stay with her? He stored the puzzle at the back of his mind as he sat at the table. Between his call and arrival, Deborah had somehow organized extra chairs to be brought onto the terrace, the table to be extended and refreshments to be delivered. He poured a glass of cold juice for her, then himself, as he spoke.

"We have a couple of problems that I think you can help with. Do you mind if we run through them with you?" As Gideon anticipated, Deborah smiled at him and gestured for him to continue. Her sisters sat back silently. They both had their eyes closed and he suspected that they were both linked to Deborah so that she could act as spokesperson for them. He wasn't talking to just one person, but three, all channeled through one body.

"We need your help in concealing Alwyn's ship. When we first arrived on Eriadne, you did a damned good job of hiding the shuttle that John and Max arrived in. Can you do that again?"

Deborah nodded. "Yes. That's easy. We have a piece of equipment that alters the viewer's perception of what they're seeing. That's what we used when you first arrived. Ilas is best at using it. The alteration of perception seems to have a natural affinity with her shape-shifting abilities. We can set that up as soon as Alwyn signals that the jump point has opened."

Gideon pressed his lips together and nodded. [One down, one to go.]

"Good. The other thing is more difficult. We've noticed that Lucas seems to be able to sense when people are near. You told me that time he was here in your rooms, that he sensed my approach and left. If he can do that, he'll never walk into the trap we're setting up. He'll back off and probably go straight back to his ship, without giving John enough time to secure it. So we need to stop him sensing the people in the courtyard."

Gideon watched as Deborah's eyes closed. He waited for her to finish her mental debate with her sisters. She eventually opened her eyes and spoke. "Let me explain something before I answer that. There are things we can do within the castle walls that we can't do outside and there are things that are easier inside. That's because there's an energy field in and around the castle that we can draw on. It makes it a lot easier for Ilas to change shape within the castle walls, but she can still do it outside. That energy field also has the effect of blocking telepathic contact to some extent. When I was still sending, it was that energy field that prevented the whole village being affected by my projections." She smiled and dropped her head, blushing slightly at the memory of the intensity of some of those projections. Gideon laughed softly and reached for her hand across the table.

Deborah continued. "That means that Lucas won't be able to sense anyone inside the castle when he's outside. But John will need to be careful to shield himself and his team from detection."

Matheson nodded. "I can do that. That's why I'm going down to the ship rather than Matthew or Dureena. But I can't shield more than ten of us, so that puts the limit on the size of the team I can take."

Gideon gestured at Deborah to carry on. "As soon as Lucas crosses that energy field, the effect will reverse. He'll be able to sense what's inside the castle, but not what's outside. Does that make sense?" She looked at Gideon.

"Yes, I think so. Let me make sure I understand this. When Lucas is outside the castle he won't be able to sense the teams we have waiting inside, but John and his team will need shielding. As soon as he crosses the energy field, John and his team are safe from detection, but we'll need to shield the people inside. Is that it?"

Deborah confirmed his understanding. "That's right. So you're going to need someone to block him when he gets inside. And Lily is the only one who can do that if John is outside."

Gideon considered. "Can she do it from the infirmary?" He asked Deborah the question rather than ask Lily directly, as the small redhead still had her eyes closed.

Deborah shook her head. "Not if you want to be sure. She'll need to be in line of sight to be certain. And Ilas will need to operate her equipment from the battlements if you want that to work properly too.

Gideon sat back in his chair. "Damn." He sat trying to think of ways around the problem, aware that the others were watching and waiting for him to arrive at a conclusion. He sighed as he bowed to the inevitable. "Well, I suppose that means that Ilas and Lily are going to have to be in the courtyard, but I want them up on the battlements, well out of trouble, and I still want you to stay with the others in the infirmary." He looked at Deborah and stroked her hand as he spoke.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Matthew, but it doesn't work like that. If you want Lily to block Lucas from sensing over forty people, she's going to need help. We're going to have to link and we're going to have to be in physical contact with each other to make it work. I'll have to be with them."

Gideon sighed again. He hated this. He briefly considered asking Alwyn to take the sisters away on his ship, but he knew that would solve nothing. Lucas would sense the presence of the guards and disappear. They'd have no idea when he'd return to try again, and Gideon couldn't stay on this planet guarding Deborah forever.

"All right, but the three of you stay high and out of range of any weapons fire. Is that clear?" He watched as Deborah nodded, relieved that she'd agreed to that much. He finished his drink and turned to Matheson and Dureena. "I'll catch up with you later."

He held onto Deborah's hand as the others left, Nikarran leading, John with his arm around Lily's shoulders, [and I bet I know where they're headed,] and Ilas and Dureena arm in arm. When they were finally alone he turned to Deborah and said, "Now, you have my undivided attention. What do you want to do with it?"

Deborah didn't speak as she stood and pulled Gideon's hand until he stood next to her. She led him back into her living room, then let go of his hand. She turned to face him and started to unbutton his shirt.

John and Lily walked back to her room silently, Lily holding John's hand that rested on her shoulder, her other arm around his waist, lost in thought.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, John turned her to face him, gently holding her face between his hands, his look investigating and concerned. "What is it? You three seemed upset, and worried. Granted, Lucas wants to abduct your sister, but it felt to me as if this was about something else, and I saw how you and Ilas watched Demon, and especially Matthew, before we left."

Lily's eyes seemed enormous as she looked up at him for a long time, obviously worried. Then she threw herself into his arms, turning sideways so her belly wouldn't get in the way too much. She felt John's arms close around her, and the most gentle, reassuring touch at the edge of her mind. Lily knew he was careful not to scan her accidentally, and sighed, sending back her gratefulness. "Please don't ask me... There's nothing I'd like to do more, but I can't tell you. If what I—what we fear comes true, I don't want you to get caught in the middle and if nothing happens, you'll worry for no reason."

She looked up at him, her eyes wet. "Please make love to me."

John was too perplexed by her behavior to answer, but when she pulled him down into a passionate kiss, his body's response was loud and clear.

Gideon lay on his back among the cushions on the floor, his left arm around Deborah's shoulders, holding her close to his side as she rested her head on his shoulder. His right hand rested on her swollen belly, stroking the soft skin gently. He was still puzzled by her behavior, but wasn't complaining.

After dragging him back into the living room, she'd stripped him and then herself, thrown cushions on the floor, pushed him back onto the cushions and proceeded to give him the most incredible blow job he'd ever had in his life. She'd used her lips, tongue, teeth and fingers to bring him to the brink of orgasm then held him there, blowing gently on the head of his swollen cock until he calmed, then closed her mouth around him again to bring him back to the edge of climax. She'd repeated this process until Gideon had thought that his head was going to explode, closely followed by his balls. He'd tried to pull back when he felt he couldn't hold off any longer, but Deborah had pushed his hands away and taken him deep into her mouth and throat, pushing him over the edge. He had no idea how she hadn't

drowned when he'd come and kept on coming with a force and duration that he was sure he'd never achieved before.

Afterwards, Gideon had tried to return the pleasure Deborah had given him, but she pushed his hands aside again and whispered that she just wanted him to enjoy himself. Well, he'd certainly done that. She'd moved to his feet and started to massage and kiss them gently, then moved to his ankles and calves. By the time she reached his thighs he was erect again. She'd shifted up his body until she was poised over his cock, then lowered herself, slowly and carefully, onto him. She was wet with the juices of her own arousal, but still tight around him as she eased him inside her. Gideon could feel her stretching with each gentle thrust down onto him, slowly parting to allow him entry. By the time he was fully enclosed within her, he was close to coming again.

This time he was determined that Deborah was going to come with him, so he slipped a hand between them and found her clitoris with his fingers. As she gradually increased the pace of her movements, Gideon started to thrust up into her, responding to her, staying with her, letting her lead, but making sure that she got as much pleasure as he did. He was having to think of ice cubes, cold showers, snow drifts and had just progressed to glaciers when he felt her walls pulse and tighten around him as she approached climax. He pressed into her clit and thrust up, lifting her into orgasm along with him as he finally let himself come.

Deborah rested above him for a few moments, supporting herself on her arms either side of Gideon, her belly preventing her from collapsing on top of him. When she'd caught her breath, she'd lifted off him and lay by his side, her head on his shoulder.

He kissed the top of her head and said, "So what's this all about? I know that you can't keep your hands off me, but you don't normally seduce me in the middle of the day." Gideon tried to keep his tone light, but he was genuinely puzzled and concerned by Deborah's unusual behavior. He wanted to understand what was driving her.

She didn't answer for a while, then finally whispered, "I told you. I wanted to show you that I love you."

Gideon put his hand under her chin and lifted it until Deborah was looking at him. "I know that. You don't have to show me anything."

He watched as her eyes filled and she spoke. "Please, remember that. Whatever happens, remember that."

Now he was getting really worried. "Deborah, what's going on? What do you think is going to happen? You don't think Lucas is going to win here, do you? I'm not going to let that happen, I won't let him take you and the baby. If that's what's bothering you..."

Deborah pressed her fingers to his lips. "Just promise me that you'll remember." Gideon took her hand and kissed her fingers, still wondering what the hell was going on when his commlink and the comm. console both went off at the same moment. It was Alwyn's signal; the jump point had opened.

Gideon hit the receive button on his commlink and took the message. They could expect Lucas to land in a minimum of five hours, plenty of time to organize their welcoming committee. He turned back to see that Deborah was listening carefully. He reached out to caress her face. "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine."

Sarah Chambers sat back in her armchair, considering the data projected in front of her. Alwyn's ship had proved a total contrast to Galen's. It was light and bright inside, with none of the dark shadows that seemed to hover around Galen at all times. Sarah had nearly laughed aloud when Alwyn had ushered them into his 'control room'. It looked exactly how she had always imagined a study at one of the ancient English universities would look. There were comfortable old armchairs, a central table piled high with books and a fireplace with a roaring fire. Bookcases surrounded the walls and books overflowed onto every other surface. She knew that it was all an illusion but it was a comfortable and comforting illusion.

Alwyn had pulled a small sphere from his robes and given his ship instructions on monitoring for a jump point opening. He'd then instructed it to start displaying data on nanoviruses. He'd taken her and Luke step by step through all the data he had on how such viruses were created and built. Most of this confirmed what she had worked out for herself, but where it got really interesting was when the 3D holographic display started to show how the controlling mechanisms were built. This was the vital missing link that Chambers so desperately needed. All the work she'd done had ground to a halt at this point. Using the information that Max had brought back from the last visit to Eriadne, she could now tailor the Technomage nanovirus so it retained the programming she gave it and kept working indefinitely, providing a permanent viral screen. What Sarah had been unable to do was to create the nanovirus that she could then tailor. What Alwyn was now showing her were the building blocks that she could use to do just that. These would still require a lot of work to get to the point where she could create the nanovirus herself, but she could see where to start, something that had eluded her up to now.

Trying to contain her excitement at what she was now seeing, Sarah started to question Alwyn in detail about the material he was showing her. Luke Raven listened carefully, and although the technical details were outside his field, he asked cogent and useful questions, challenging some of her basic assumptions. They were deep in discussion when a low tone sounded.

The holoprojection in front of them changed instantly to provide a view of a solar system as seen from above. A red light was flashing about halfway between the tiny central sun and the outer edge of the projection. At the same time a female voice with a strong English accent spoke. "Jump point opening."

Alwyn spoke into mid-air. "Thank you, Ship. Please estimate the time for transit from the jump point to our current location."

The ship responded without pausing. "Based on the design of the ship which has just exited the jump point, a minimum of five hours will be required to reach this location. That assumes the highest velocity and shortest route. If fuel saving velocity and route are used, then a probable estimate is six hours. Please advise if you require details of probabilities assigned to each potential duration of transit."

Alwyn raised an eyebrow and turned to Luke and Sarah, speaking in a low voice. "It keeps doing that. I ask it for information and it tries to give me ten times more than I asked for." The Technomage raised his voice again. "That won't be necessary, Ship. Please send a general communication announcing minimum and probable arrival times; restrict to planetary communication sources only. Thank you."

It was evening when they gathered in the dining room. Alwyn had announced that the detected ship

had just taken up orbit above them. Gideon looked around the group gathered there and saw that only Ilas and Nikarran were missing. They were already on the battlements, using the concealment device to hide Alwyn's ship. Gideon still couldn't understand how that device worked on instruments as well as people, but he had the evidence of his own first visit to prove that it did.

He called the group to order, then started to describe the revised plan of action. "We've had a change of plan since this morning and I wanted to make sure you all understand what's expected of you and where you're expected to be." Gideon turned to each person as he spoke.

"John, you'll leave immediately with your team of nine guards to take up your position and wait for Lucas to leave his ship. You signal us when he does and then move in and secure it." Matheson nodded.

"Sarah, I want you, Luke and Max in the infirmary. No arguments. I don't need civilians under my feet. Stay there until you're given the all clear." He got reluctant agreement from the three.

"Alwyn, you'll be up on the battlements with Deborah, Lily and Ilas. I'll have five guards up there with you but you can do more to protect them than any of us. Will you do that?" Gideon looked closely at the old man. Assigning him as bodyguard for the women seemed perverse, but the Technomage was the best defense for them that he could think of. The Captain hated the idea of having any of the women in the courtyard at all, but was making the best that he could of a bad situation.

Alwyn smiled. "I can't think of any place I would rather be than in the company of three beautiful women. The pleasure will be entirely mine, Captain."

"Wait a minute." Raven stared at Gideon for a long moment, then at Lily. "You didn't tell me."

Gideon opened his mouth to explain the change of plans, but Lily was faster and took Luke's hand in hers. "Short-term change of plans. There was no time to tell you. There isn't any other way; I have to shield us all from Lucas, and I can't do that if I'm in the infirmary. Don't worry, Ilas and Demon will be with me. And Alwyn."

Everybody around the table was looking on as Luke scowled, thoughts racing. He didn't like this at all, but then Gideon had apparently agreed to let Demon go up there too, and the Captain was just as worried about her safety as he was about Lily's. Still...

John leaned forward to lay a hand on his arm and said, "There really is no other way. And they'll be just as safe on the battlements as in the infirmary."

Luke could feel a soothing mental touch, and the admission that John didn't like putting Lily into danger either, but recognized the necessity. He sighed, then looked at Lily, a worried look in his eyes, seeing her determination, and giving her a wry smile. "At least this way I know you won't sneak out suddenly." He squeezed her hand, and she smiled at him gratefully.

Gideon let out a sigh of relief. "OK. Dureena, Nikarran and I will have the rest of the guards around the courtyard. Any questions?" He checked round every person there and got a shake of the head or a "No" from each. "Then take your places, ladies and gentlemen, the show could begin within the hour. But be patient, it's quite possible that Lucas will wait until it gets dark to make his move. Stay in place

until you get John's signal that he's moving. I'll see you all at breakfast in the morning when we debrief. Go to it."

He watched as Dureena, John, Sarah, Luke and Max left the room. He turned to Deborah and took her hand, squeezing it briefly. "I'm staying with you until we get the signal from John, then I'll take up position with my group. Don't worry, it's going to be fine." Gideon still had no idea what was upsetting her, but it was clear that something was wrong. He could see that Lily was watching them carefully, her face expressing her concern, but about what? He could only put it down to fear that something would go wrong and that Lucas would take Deborah away from her sisters.

"Come on then. We've got a welcome mat to roll out."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn

{[Part 1: Past](#)} {[Part 2: Present](#)} {[Part 3: Present Perfect](#)} {[Part 4: Future](#)} {[Part 5: Conditional](#)}