

The Witches of Eriadne: Something Wicked this Way Comes - Part 1: The Gathering

by The Space Witches



Is it a dream... or more?

Chapter 2

August 2276

I stand on a hill, taking a deep breath to fill my lungs with fresh, clean air. I never was able to get used to the recycled air on star-ships or stations. I can get by in a regulated environment, but there's nothing like a big thunderstorm.

The night is cool, but not unpleasantly so, as I look across the plane stretching out in front of me. I can make out hills in the sparse light of the stars and a tiny moon, and farther ahead, mountains silhouetted against the star-filled night sky, where clouds had begun to gather as I made my way up this hill.

But although they spread quickly, I pay them no more heed than the houses nestled against the side of

the nearest hill straight ahead of me. My eyes fix on the dark form on top of it. I feel cold satisfaction rise. Soon. Soon I will get what I want and need. And this time, I'll make sure everything goes my way.

Wind rises, and the clouds now completely block out the moon and stars.

No one will ever defeat me again.

I allow the bitterness and rage to rise within me as with a stroke of lightning, rain starts to fall hard, the gates of heaven opening all at once. The wind has grown from a breeze to a storm, and suddenly a gust hits me violently, pushing me--

onto my back, into un-mown grass in a wild garden, filled with statues and gargoyles. I'm surrounded by familiar faces--some of them expected, others not, but there's no time to think about that as I fight against the binding spell that holds me down, and I know they won't be able to hold me for long. I snort at their audacity. Did they really think they could defeat me? I know their weaknesses; I can wear them out, play their unstable, insecure minds against each other.

Who shall I start with--my once trusty sidekick, who finally seems to have grown a backbone? But no, my head whips around to my right, mind lashing out at the slender woman standing there with her usual feline grace, and I feel bitter satisfaction when I see her tear-filled eyes widen in shock. She knows me better than anyone, knows she will suffer for what she does to me. But my attack is blocked, as the circle's energy suddenly flares. After a moment of confusion I know that I have been betrayed. Pride and rage fight within me as my eyes lock with those of the young man who steps in to complete the circle, between the dark-haired woman whom I had once chosen to carry my child, and the thin, blond man I had thought defeated, but who now stands tall.

Pride that after all these years struggling against it, my successor finally accepts the power he has inherited. Rage that he is using it against me, against US, for some ridiculous 'noble' reason that was drummed into his head by his so-called protectors. I know that joined with him, they have the power to defeat me. I want to taunt him, goad him, seduce him as I used to, but he knows the game as well as I do. Before I can speak, my throat tightens as he narrows his eyes.

I feel the circle's power rise, as the black witch's incantations grow louder and the others chime in. All these years she bided her time, hid the true depths of her voodoo magic, until now. The air crackles with electricity around me, as I am lifted, floating above the grass. I struggle, trying to find a weakness that I can exploit, but the whirling, pulsing energy of the circle protects them, closing their hearts and minds to me. Lifting their arms, hands joined, they repeat one word over and over, sending a piercing pain that shoots through my chest, and a small part of me that isn't overwhelmed by this pain is aware that my body is convulsing, out of my control.

NOOOOOOO!

I know I scream though I cannot hear it, as I feel myself falling,

falling,

their faces grow dim

as

darkness

rises.

Lily's eyes flew open as she sat up abruptly, her heart beating so furiously that she expected it to jump out of her chest at any moment. Struggling for breath, she looked down, touching the spot where she could still feel a lingering pain. Her limbs were shaking, as if she had over-exercised them, and a dull pain pressed against her temples. She was barely able to think, so instead she lay back and closed her eyes, forcing herself to take several deep breaths and relax.

[Heart problems? Impossible. They would have noticed that at my last checkup.] No, the pain wasn't in her heart, which was still racing. In fact, the ache seemed to go right through the center of her chest from front to back, and spread out from there, as if something had pierced her...

A shaft of bright light... Her eyes flew open.

Looking around herself wide-eyed, Lily became aware that she was still in her living room on the Excalibur, and the last thing she remembered was sitting on the sofa reading, while waiting for John to come home. Luke had left earlier for his night shift, and the children were already in bed, so she'd taken advantage of the peace and quiet to read.

[I must have dozed off.] She looked down at the floor, where the book she'd been reading had landed face-down: 'The Secret World of Polly Flint', an old favorite of hers. "I don't think this would have inspired such a weird dream," Lily murmured, as she leaned forward and swept down to pick it up. Mid-move she stopped, her hand hovering above the book. "Or was it a dream?" she whispered, a strange feeling creeping over her.

Lily concentrated, trying to recall the images she had seen, before they faded from her mind. The first part... She could have sworn it was Eriadne. [Of course, we'll be there soon. Home again, finally.] For a moment, Lily allowed herself to feel the joy that always accompanied the thought. She knew her sisters had mixed feelings about their return to Eriadne, but for Lily, it was the only home she could remember, before the Excalibur. She couldn't wait to see Kirrin and her daughter Thikira again, and all the other children she had taught. Occasionally, she would talk to them on the comm. but it wasn't the same as being with them. She missed her Brakiri friends, despite her busy life on the Excalibur. [And now I'll see them again.]

With a tiny shake of her head, Lily returned her attention to the memory of her dream. Maybe the feeling of being about to get something she had longed for was related to the figure of The Catcher in the book. That character was trying to catch the Time Gypsies, so he could slip through the net of time with them again.

What really puzzled her was the second part of the 'dream'. For some reason, Lily was sure this had nothing to do with her own past life on Earth, before the Vorlons had abducted her. Some memories may have been lost forever when the Others had manipulated her to bring out her abilities, but others were still buried somewhere deep inside her head. They resurfaced at unpredictable times, like bubbles of gas rising to the surface of a lake, bursting in a flash so quickly that she was rarely able to grasp more than a momentary image or emotion. This 'dream' had been too detailed to be one of those memory bubbles.

In fact, it had felt as if she'd been inside someone else's head, feeling their emotions, thinking their thoughts. [His thoughts,] she corrected herself, remembering the thought about choosing the dark-haired woman to carry his child.

So who were the people she'd seen? Lily closed her eyes, trying to visualize the faces she had seen. Some were a blur, like the 'sidekick' who had stood behind the protagonist in her 'dream', and the black woman. Still, Lily was sure that woman had been the director of the circle, leading them in the incantations, clear in her purpose. The others' images were clearer. The woman who had cried, her

finely chiseled features full of pain, but also determination. The young man with short cropped hair, his expression solemn as he had joined the circle. Lily knew there was a tight bond between him and the man whose head she'd inhabited in her dream, but nothing more. He'd stood between the woman with wavy dark brown hair, her brown eyes full of mixed emotions--pain, anger, fear, and... regret? On the young man's other side...

Lily gasped, her eyes flying open. "Impossible!" She frowned, casting her mind back again, but there was no doubt about the man she had seen. "Luke?" She laughed, but it was without mirth.

Something about seeing her partner's face made her shiver. But it was ridiculous; Luke had never had anything to do with witchcraft or magic. The closest he'd got was spending the first twelve years of his life in Glastonbury, England, and later falling in love and living with a Witch.

"This doesn't make any sense, Lilith. Your brain is playing tricks on you," she murmured, shaking her head in frustration. She put the book on the table, then rose from the sofa. For a moment, something seemed to be nagging at her, but before she could grasp it, the door opened and John came in.

"Sweet face! I didn't realize it was that late already!"

He grinned, wrapping his arms around Lily and lifting her up to cover her lips with his in a deep kiss. "Got distracted?" John grinned and pointed at the book with his chin as he set her down again.

"Now what would make you say that? It's not like I ever got lost in a book before," Lily grinned back.

"I wonder," John teased, then asked, "So, did you get all the presents for Kirrin and your other friends?"

"Yup, everything's ready, now I just have to wrap them." For a moment she contemplated telling John about the dream, but decided she wanted to think some more about it first. [It was probably only a dream, after all.] "Are you hungry?" she asked instead.

"After sitting over paperwork the whole evening with Christina, you bet. What's for dinner?"

"Well, how does freshly-made vegetable soup, followed by spaghetti al pesto sound? And the rascals even left us some panna cotta for dessert--mainly because they want to hear you praise them for it, as they helped me make it."

John chuckled. "Well, I don't want to disappoint them. And the menu sounds quite acceptable." He dodged, but not quickly enough, so Lily managed to swat his arm before he was out of her reach.

"Acceptable? I'll have you cooking all the meals from now on, then we'll see if I find *your* menus 'acceptable!'"

Teasing back and forth, they went into the kitchen together.

September 2276

Gideon leaned back in the pilot's seat and sighed softly. [Peace at last.] The family reunion on board the Minbari flyer was fun, but it got a little noisy at times with five small children on board, ranging in age from the twins and Marcus at seven, down through Naima aged five, to two and half year old Mattie. Putting his feet up on the console and his hands behind his head, Gideon mulled over the satisfactory events of the previous few weeks.

First, and most important, his relationship with his wife was better than it had ever been before. They

had again become the lovers they had been in the early days of their marriage, but with the added advantage of understanding each other profoundly, something they had achieved in the years since. Deborah had regained the weight she had lost, and in Gideon's eyes, she was more beautiful than she'd ever been. He knew this beauty came from one simple thing. She was happy.

Since curtailing all her commitments to her publishers, Deborah had focused on her family and her writing, the things that were most important to her. Gideon still felt a small niggle of guilt that she had given up her public life, but he had come to accept that it had never made her happy. The thought that he was more important to his wife than all the fame and fortune of her career left a warm glow deep inside him, despite the guilt.

Gideon knew that in an ideal world he would feel exactly the same as his wife, but he didn't have the intellectual outlet that writing gave Deborah. He was forced to acknowledge that much as he loved his family, he needed something more to keep his mind and body active. [Like blowing things up with the Excalibur's main gun. That was always good,] Gideon grinned to himself. President Sheridan had just given him exactly what he needed, even if it didn't involve blowing things up.

A couple of weeks before, Gideon had taken his family on a commercial transport to Minbar, ready for his interview with the President. They had spent a happy few days staying with Sheridan and Delenn, and Marcus had re-established his friendship with their son David, who was now a handsome thirteen year old, looking forward with great anticipation to joining the Rangers in a few years' time.

Sheridan had briefed Gideon on the job he was offering, which was that of a roving trouble-shooter, quasi-ambassadorial role for the ISA. Gideon reflected back on the words Sheridan had used to offer him the position.

"You're a problem solver, Matt. You get things done. When you worked for Earthforce and when you worked for the ISA, you showed that you know when to talk softly, and when to use a big stick. I need someone like that working for me. I need someone to follow up on new members of the ISA, resolving any issues arising from them joining. I need someone who can go to members of the ISA and bang their heads together when needed, or to smooth ruffled feathers when not."

Gideon smiled to himself. He'd never thought himself particularly good at feather smoothing, but maybe age had given him the wisdom and experience not to shoot from the hip all the time. Even if it hadn't, time had given him Deborah, who could tell him when to use soft words rather than hard knocks. Her empathic powers had diminished significantly since Galen's attack, but she could still pick up feelings when close. With her at his side as the wife of the President's 'Minister Without Portfolio', Gideon knew he could do the job Sheridan wanted done.

He and Deborah had talked about it, and agreed that whenever possible she and Mattie would accompany him on his trips, at least until Mattie reached school age. They had also discussed Sheridan's proposal with Marcus, telling him that he could travel with them and receive remote tutoring if he wanted, or he could stay at his current school and board for a month at a time, if that's what he would prefer. Marcus had accepted the latter offer with an enthusiasm that left his parents feeling a little unnecessary. Gideon smiled as he remembered cuddling Deborah in bed that night, teasing her about how she would feel when their children left home for good. Deborah had retaliated by biting him gently, which had led to a tussle, which had quickly turned amorous.

The successful visit to Minbar had culminated in the arrival of the Excalibur, and the reunion with family and friends. It had been good to see John, Lily, Luke and their children again, after so long an absence. It had also been good to see some of his old crew. Commander Christina Jackson had barely been able to contain her excitement at being left in command of the Excalibur for a month, while her Captain took a long overdue vacation. G'Tan had saluted his old Captain smartly, then swept him into

a bear hug of greeting that had left Gideon gasping for breath, and wondering if he should get Luke to check his ribs to see if there were any breaks.

Deborah, Angel and Lily had enjoyed an emotional reunion, but nothing that could compare to the exuberance with which Marcus and Dasha had celebrated their meeting again. The boys had stayed in touch by hyperlink when the Excalibur was in range and by message when it wasn't, but they had nevertheless rejoiced loudly. Hence Gideon's escape to the control room of the flyer for a little peace and quiet.

The highlight of the reunion for Gideon had been twofold. First, he had gotten to see Naima again. His fondness for the little girl had not diminished over time or distance, and he had been captivated all over again by her beauty and vivacity. Naima was now nearly six years old, and a heartbreaker already. It had taken a real effort for Gideon not to show how much he loved his unacknowledged daughter.

Seeing John again after so long had also been a real delight. The younger man had grown and matured during his time as Captain of the Excalibur, and Gideon could see that the telepath was destined to achieve a higher rank in Earthforce than he had reached himself. He was convinced people would be saluting General Matheson in the not too distant future. [But not me. John would probably faint if I saluted him.]

After the Excalibur had dropped the shuttle Gideon had hired on Minbar at the edge of the Eriadne system, John had helped Gideon maintain the fiction that one of them needed to check on the auto-pilot on a regular basis. Gideon suspected that his old XO needed to retreat from the noise and boisterousness as much as he did, if not more so because of his telepathic talent, so they had taken it in turns to spend an hour or so hidden away from the rest of the family, carrying out completely unnecessary checks on their progress toward Eriadne.

A cursory glance at the control panel completed all the checks that Gideon actually needed to carry out, and he went back to his thinking, reassured that they were progressing well on their journey, and would arrive at the planet in another thirty-six hours. The Excalibur could have taken them in much closer, but it would have meant a detour off their mission route, and Gideon had told Commander Jackson that it wasn't necessary. The trip in from the system's edge would be part of the vacation for them all. It had stayed that way for about an hour, before the retired captain had sought sanctuary in the control room.

There was another person on board who regularly retreated to the quiet haven of her cabin, obviously seeking relief from the general rowdiness and good humor. Angel had shown her delight at seeing her sister, nieces and nephew again, but it was apparent to Gideon that a return to Eriadne wouldn't have been Angel's first choice for a vacation. He wondered briefly how Deborah had persuaded her sister to join them, then smiled as he thought just how irresistible his wife could be when she tried.

Angel certainly needed a vacation. She looked tired and a little thinner than usual, which she had shrugged off as being the aftermath of completing a physically demanding movie. Gideon still worried about her, and he had taken her to one side, quietly asking her if there was anything he could do to help. Angel had given him a smile that had made his heart somersault inside his chest as she assured him that she was fine. "Just a little tired, Matt. A couple of weeks curled up with a book in a big chair in the castle library is just what I need to recharge the batteries."

Gideon had smiled back gently, and kissed her on the forehead, telling her to take more care of herself. It was the closest physical contact he'd allowed himself since she'd sent him back to Deborah.

An alarm sounded softly from the console and Gideon sighed again. His hour of peace and quiet was over. Time to face the noisy hordes again. He stood up and grinned to himself. What did he have to

complain about? He was going on vacation with the wife he adored, their children who he loved, her sister for whom he didn't really want to examine his feelings too closely, and their friends whose company he enjoyed. The next two weeks were going to be spent in the lap of luxury at his wife's old home. The noise of happy children playing was a small sacrifice to make.

Bracing himself, Gideon left the control room and entered the main cabin.

Lily was fixing the booster seat for Naima on the chair next to her own, while in the row in front of them, Luke showed Faylinn and Dasha how to open and close their safety belts. A few minutes ago, Matthew had informed them that they would enter Eriadne's atmosphere shortly, and that their seats would again be folding out from the side-walls of the main lounge, just as they had during departure from Minbar. John had declared he'd join Matthew to assist with the landing, and Lily had been forced to bite her lip so she wouldn't laugh, when she had caught the look Demon had given her. They both knew full well that one person could land this shuttle alone, and that the autopilot didn't need constant surveillance.

Lily settled Naima into her booster seat, next to the window. Sitting next to the little girl, they both could look out as the ship approached the planet's surface. The way the seats were arranged in twin rows, looking forward, reminded Lily of planes on 20th century Earth. [Amazing how some things stay essentially the same for centuries. Though seats this comfortable and with so much legroom would only have been available on a first class flight, back then.]

"Just because I'm busy here, don't think I haven't seen you sneaking out of your chair again, Faylinn Sahar. One more time, and I'll place you under house arrest in the castle's nursery for the next five days, while the rest of us go out exploring!" Lily turned her head, catching her older daughter standing in front of Dasha's seat. Lily had more sensed than seen Faylinn as she'd undone her safety belt and slid out of her own seat, only moments after Luke had turned away and crossed the lounge, to sit next to Angel.

Lily gave her protesting older daughter a stern look, one eyebrow raised, until the girl pouted and plopped back into her seat next to Dasha. Only when she had fixed her seat belt again, did Lily turn back to her younger daughter, who had remained seated quietly.

Having made sure all her children were safely strapped in, Lily settled into her own seat, feeling excitement bubble up inside her as she glimpsed the surface of Eriadne beneath and ahead of them. She barely registered Demon calling Matthew through the intercom, advising him that everyone was strapped in safely. Neither did the excited chatting of the children, or the slight shaking of the shuttle as they entered the planet's atmosphere, intrude on Lily's mind.

[Green grass and flowers, real woods, valleys and hills and mountains, wind and rain and sunlight, heat and cold. Our castle, the orchard, the library, my bath and the lounging pit, my window seat. And the village, all our friends.] Lily swallowed a lump that had suddenly formed in her throat as she thought of all the things and people she had missed.

[But you've been away for seven years, so don't think everything and everyone will be the same,] a voice inside her head whispered.

[Seeing how much our lives have changed since we left, I guess you're right,] she admitted. [But the planet, the castle, and our friends are still there, and that's what matters.]

Lily didn't have any more time for her musings, as her children started bombarding her with questions.

Eriadne - Day 1

Lily's eyes swept over the group of Brakiri approaching the Minbari shuttle as she walked down the ramp, holding Naima's hand. Her excitement about the impending meeting with her friends turned into confusion, which increased with every face she saw. They were mostly strangers, and the few she did recognize were people who the four witches had known, but who hadn't been in close contact with them.

Lily gave Angel, standing beside her, a questioning look, discreetly tilting her head toward the Brakiri, who now stopped at a short distance. Angel's only reaction was a quirk of her eyebrows, in lieu of a shrug. She was just as clueless about what was going on as Lily.

One of the strange Brakiri stepped forward and greeted them. He bid the witches welcome back to Eriadne in the name of all the villagers, and offered the help of their group with carrying their baggage. Demon smiled regally and accepted the welcome and help, but her composed mask didn't fool Lily. She was just as surprised to be greeted by strangers as her sisters.

[Where are Kirrin and our other friends?] Lily didn't allow herself to feel disappointed. [Not yet. I'm sure there's an explanation. Maybe they just want to tease us, so they sent some new colonists, and our friends are waiting for us at the castle.]

With the baggage distributed among Luke, John, and the Brakiri, while Matthew carried little Mattie, the group started moving. Lily fell into step with the others, looking ahead at the castle. A memory seemed to nag at the back of her mind. Despite the bright sunshine, it was something to do with the castle looming black against a star-filled night sky. [Silly,] she told herself, [You've seen that view many times. You're over-reacting to the absence of your Brakiri friends.]

"Ma, will we go visit your old friend, the tree, and Devi the bat?" Dasha looked up at her eagerly. He and Faylinn had put Naima between them, holding her hands as they walked in front of their Dad and Aboji. The two girls seemed just as interested in Lily's answer, from the looks they gave their mother, and Luke had to steady Faylinn as she stumbled on a small pebble that lay in her way.

Lily smiled. She had told her children about her special places on Eriadne, and they had made her promise to take them with her to these places. "Of course we will. Thikira thought she'd seen Devi shortly before she'd sent her last message, so I want us to go say hello." She laughed as her children nodded enthusiastically. "Not today though. I'd like to rest a bit in my old room. But I'm sure you'll find the castle and grounds entertaining enough for now. You can explore as much as you like."

The twins unanimously voiced their approval with a loud "Yes," Naima only a half second behind.

Grinning, Lily slowly swept her eyes over the landscape that had barely changed in the seven years since they had left Eriadne. [We've been away longer than we've lived here,] she realized. It was an odd thought somehow.

Looking to her right, Lily noticed one of the strange Brakiri looking at her. He smiled cordially, and Lily smiled back, before turning her eyes toward the castle again. That look had been... odd. [Stop being paranoid. He's probably just curious because of the stories our friends have told the newcomers about us. Well, they'll have a few stories to tell us, too.]

Walking up the hill to the castle, Demon kept tight hold of Marcus' hand. Something didn't feel quite

right. The group who had greeted them hadn't included any of the people she remembered so well from the years she had spent living on Eriadne. Where was Kirrin? Why hadn't Ranikir come to greet them? Did she hold Demon responsible for her father's death? Was that why she'd stayed at home, not welcoming the witches' return?

The group had included many people Demon didn't recognize. New faces, Brakiri who had joined the colony in the seven years that had passed since the witches had left Eriadne. The new Brakiri didn't seem the colonist types. Harder of face, sharp eyed and humorless, the newcomers didn't look like farmers, but more like the businessmen types from whom the colonists had fled to find a new life on Eriadne. Where had these new Brakiri come from, and why were they here?

The questions buzzed around in Demon's head, making her uncomfortable. The mass of people and her diminished powers made it difficult for her to read the emotions of any of those greeting them, but she didn't sense any outright hostility. Telling herself she was being silly, Demon looked down at her son walking next to her and smiled. Marcus' mouth was wide open and she could feel his excitement as they approached the castle. He'd had it described to him many times, and seen pictures of it, but the reality was overwhelming to a seven year old.

Marcus tugged at his mother's hand and grinned up at her. "Was I really born here? Can Dasha and I go exploring soon? This place looks amazing! Can we go wherever we want?"

Demon laughed softly, "Yes, you were really born here and yes, you can go wherever you want, as long as you stay in the castle grounds and village, but Faylinn and Naima will probably want to go with you. You can explore as much as you like, but stay together."

Marcus started to pout, but then looked up at his mother and grinned. "OK, as long as I don't have to drag Mattie around with us, too. Flynn and Nima can keep up with me and Dasha, but Mattie's too little."

Demon smiled and nodded at where Matthew was carrying their daughter, the little girl's head resting on her father's shoulder. "I think Mattie is ready for a nap, so you won't have to worry about her. Off you go, and when you're ready, ask one of the Brakiri to tell you the way to Lily's room. You'll be staying in the old nursery next door, with Dasha and the girls, OK?"

Marcus pouted a little at the idea of having to share with his sister and cousins, but Demon quickly reassured him that it was a big room. "Anyway, I suspect that Mattie will probably want to sleep in our rooms, where she can be near her Daddy."

Marcus laughed and glanced around at his younger sister. "She's always been a Daddy's girl."

Demon raised an eyebrow and looked down at her son. "And what does that make you?" She gave him a mischievous grin.

Marcus stuck his tongue out at his mother as he turned away, running off to be with his friends. As he ran he sent, [[Anyone who tries to call me a Mummy's boy is dead meat!]]

Gideon moved to walk alongside his wife, watching as their son ran off with Dasha, Faylinn and Naima. "Where are that lot off to?"

"Exploring. For them this is one giant playground, and Marcus knows he's not to leave the castle grounds and village." Deborah smiled and took Gideon's free hand, pausing to stroke their daughter's golden curls. "Mattie can nap on the sofa while we unpack."

Gideon nodded, kissing his daughter's head where it lay against his shoulder. "The excitement was all a bit too much for her. We should just be grateful she's napping rather than running around getting overtired." It wouldn't have been the first time Mattie had made herself sick with over-excitement.

Changing the subject, Gideon nodded at the Brakiri carrying their bags up to the castle. "I don't recognize these guys, do you?" The greeting they had received on arrival had been less enthusiastic than he'd expected. The sisters had been loved by the Brakiri when they'd lived here. Could seven short years have changed so much?

Deborah shook her head. "No. Most of these people are new to me. There must have been an influx of new colonists since we left. But these new people seem friendly. They were kind enough to offer to help with our things."

Gideon nodded, shifting his daughter in his arms. He wasn't sure he agreed, and decided he was going to watch these new Brakiri very closely. A stray thought passed through his mind.

[I wish I'd packed my old PPG. I wonder if John brought a weapon.]

John watched as the children ran off, laughing. He smiled and turned to Lily, saying, "They're going to have great fun here. It's good for them to have space to run around in."

Lily laughed and did a little dancing step as she linked her arms through his and Luke's. "We're going to have great fun, too. I can't wait to see my old rooms again. Do you think the bed can really be as big as I remember it? I guess it would have to be for us to have done all the things I remember doing there." The little red-head's smile turned lascivious as she looked up at her men.

John smiled down and kissed his beloved's forehead, then his smile faded as he caught sight of the tough-looking Brakiri helping carry their baggage up the hill to the castle. "Do any of these guys look familiar to you two? I don't recognize them."

Both Lily and Luke shook their heads. After a few moments, Lily spoke, her voice tinged with disappointment. "I wonder why Kirrin and Thikira didn't come to greet us. I haven't had a message from them for a while now, but I thought they'd be here."

John sensed her disappointment and pulled his arm free to wrap it around her shoulders, hugging her close in reassurance. "I'm sure there's a good reason, and as soon as we're settled in, we can go down to the village and visit them. After we've reminded ourselves just how big that bed of yours is."

Lily looked up at him lovingly, then winked at him and Luke, her voice deep and husky, full of promise as she said, "I packed some silk scarves, and I still have my little dagger, you know."

John chuckled and kissed her forehead again, quickly suppressing the surge of lust her words provoked. It wasn't difficult when he again caught sight of the group of Brakiri walking behind them. A stray thought passed through his mind.

[I wish I'd packed my PPG. I wonder if Matthew brought a weapon.]

Angel dumped her luggage on the floor. Not in the mood to unpack, she sat on the edge of the bed and inhaled deeply, trying to calm the turmoil within her. It wasn't easy. It had taken a lot of convincing and cajoling from Demon to get her back to Eriadne. Now that she was here, all Angel wanted to do was run away, even though she knew she couldn't. Demon was right; she had confronted so many of

her past ghosts. This was just one more she had to face down, if she wanted to get on with her life.

Eriadne was a place filled with memories. Many of them were good, but all Angel could think of at that moment were the bad ones. Foremost in her mind was the last time she had been on Eriadne with Lucas, and what had followed-her betrayal of Lucas, which had led to her having to flee the planet with Nikarran.

A lump formed in Angel's throat as she remembered her old friend, and his murder on Mars. Her stomach knotted, knowing that now she was back, she would have to face his daughter. The only consolation was that Demon would be there to support her. Angel knew Demon had her own reasons for visiting Nikarran's daughter. Demon had never stopped feeling responsible for Nikarran's death, having asked the Brakiri to look after Angel. It was going to be difficult for both of them.

Still sitting, other thoughts and memories began to assail her. Angel looked up and surveyed her room. She now wished she had gone to some other quarters, instead of the ones she'd occupied when she had lived there. Although the bedroom and living room had changed, and most of the personal belongings she had left behind were packed away in storage, the place still held potent memories. Angel glanced over at the far end of the bedroom, where the door to her old workshop stood open. A shiver ran down her spine as she recalled the things she had done there. Things that had brought Lucas Buck into her world, and changed her life forever.

Angel stood abruptly, walked over to the workshop and quickly shut the door. Inexplicably, she felt herself break into a cold sweat as an overwhelming feeling of dread came over her. "I should never have come back," she said aloud to herself. The raven-haired witch couldn't explain it, but she had the awful feeling that something bad was going to happen.

"Don't be ridiculous! Lily's the one with foresight. If anything were going to happen, she would surely have seen it! Stop being paranoid," said Angel, trying to convince herself. It didn't work. Lily's visions weren't always reliable. Just because Lily hadn't seen anything, didn't mean it wasn't going to happen. Suddenly, the walls of her room seemed to close in, threatening to trap her. "I have to get out of here!"

Pushing herself away from the door, Angel all but ran from her quarters. She made her way hastily through the castle's corridors and headed for the library. There, she had always felt at peace and been able to think straight. Maybe in the library she could pull herself together, and convince herself that she was being silly and letting her fears get the better of her. Once she was able to do that, then perhaps she would be able to settle down and enjoy the visit. If she couldn't do that, Angel wasn't sure she'd be able to stay. Reaching the great wooden doors of the library, Angel hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Demon looked around at her room and couldn't help smiling. Everything was just as she'd remembered. The white sofas on either side of the low table. The large French windows leading out onto the terrace, open to allow a cool breeze to blow through, billowing the white voile curtains that sheltered the living room from the hot sun.

The Brakiri placed their bags in the corner by the door, and Demon thanked them warmly as they nodded and left the room, closing the door behind them. As Matthew carefully laid Mattie down on the sofa, putting a white cushion under the little girl's head as a pillow, Demon walked through to the bedroom. Waving her hand over the light panel, she smiled again as she saw her old bed, looking just how she'd left it. The white quilt covered the bed, and white satin cushions were piled high against the bed head. The room was spotless, as was the adjoining bathroom, which Demon checked quickly, before her husband joined her in the bedroom.

Matthew's arm snaked around Demon's waist from behind, and she felt the touch of his lips against

her bare neck, sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine. Since their reconciliation a few weeks before, they had been happier than ever together. Demon had opened herself up to Matthew again, allowing herself to feel what he felt. She now knew how much he loved her, and she reveled in that love, returning it in full.

Pulling her close against him, Matthew grinned and nodded at the bed. "That brings back a few memories. I remember every night we spent together in that bed, and I'll never forget how you looked that first night, when I woke and saw you next to me."

Demon turned in his arms and smiled, the memories of that night warming a place deep inside her, a place only her husband could heat. Touching his lips with hers, she whispered, "I think we spent more time in that bed than in any other place in the castle. While Mattie's asleep and we have a little peace and quiet, shall we remind ourselves why?"

Matthew's mouth opened under the pressure of her lips, and Demon was surrendering herself to the passion of his kiss when she was distracted by a loud thud and a wail of dismay from the living room.

Lily sighed. "We still haven't made sure that my bed is as big as we remember it..." Luke thought she gave a perfect impression of the proverbial cat that had eaten the cream, as she smiled at him and John lazily. Somehow, they had ended up in her lounging pit, tumbling down into the soft padding and cushions, in a state of partial undress soon after the door had closed behind the Brakiri carrying their bags. Now their clothes lay strewn in and around the lounging pit, and they lay curled together in the afterglow, the bright sun outside filling the room with a warm light.

Luke chuckled and placed a gentle kiss on Lily's bare shoulder. "Well, there's more than enough time to remind ourselves of the size of your bed... and your bath."

"In reverse order, please?" John inserted, from where he lay on Luke's other side. "Not that I have anything against Fire-Lily's bed," he grinned at their partner, then continued, "but the thought of a real, honest-to-God, hot water bath..." He left the sentence unfinished, smiling suggestively.

Before Luke knew what had happened, Lily had grabbed his and John's hands, and pulled them up and after her, as she led the way to her bathroom, her red locks streaming down her naked body. "Oh, definitely. We really need a proper bath after the long trip and our recent... exertion." Her last words came out in a purr, making Luke's cock twitch in response.

The bathroom was still as amazing as it had been the first time he'd seen it--huge, walls and floor covered in mosaics, with the real eye-catcher by the right hand wall: the bath itself. Seemingly formed out of a single big rock formed like a wave, two tubs were carved in it. Lily immediately steered them toward the left, deeper tub, and within moments it was filling with water, both from the tap and from the artificial waterfall that was built into the top of the 'wave' above it.

Letting go of John and Luke's hands, Lily stepped under the stream, sighing languidly as the water hit her, before turning to them. Reaching out her hands, the tiny redhead smiled lasciviously, invitingly, like Aphrodite, born of the sea. Her voice was low and husky as she said softly, "You two have been very dirty boys, so I'll have to wash you... thoroughly."

Angel walked slowly around the library. Little had changed while she'd been away. Here and there gaps showed on the shelves, where Demon had removed books when she had left Eriadne. Spending long, happy moments dwelling on all the good memories evoked by just being in the library, eventually

Angel came to the pedestal that stood in front of the great window. She didn't know why, but she was surprised to find the Grimoire still there. Angel walked up to it and reached out to touch the old leather-bound cover, her fingers tracing along the ancient symbol in the center. Almost immediately, she withdrew her hand with a flinch and stepped away from it.

Most of the anxiety about being back on Eriadne had started to dissipate since she'd been in the library, and she had begun to believe the feeling of impending doom had all been in her mind, but on touching the magic book the feelings returned, stronger than ever. A magical book as powerful as this one was known to take on the essence of the person using it. It would give off energy connected to the purpose for which it had recently been used, be it for good or evil. When she'd touched the book, Angel had sensed evil. Worse than that, she had felt a familiar presence. [Please, don't let it be true!]

Angel knew she had to get to her sisters' rooms and warn them that something was wrong. She backed away from the pedestal, her heart pounding. She almost screamed when she collided with something solid behind her. Angel spun around to face what she had bumped into, and almost passed out when she instantly recognized the man standing there. The floor beneath her began to sway. She wanted to scream, to run, but she was frozen in place. All Angel could do was whisper a name.

Gideon flung the door to the living room open, and strode through. He was met by the sight of a large man squatting in front of the table between the sofas, apparently peering underneath. Another even larger man stood in the doorway. He raised a gun, pointing it at Gideon as he burst through the door. Mattie was nowhere in sight.

"Who the fuck are you and what are you doing here?" Gideon ignored the firearm pointing directly at his chest, and spat the words out angrily, moving to stand in between Deborah and the gun, as she tried to follow him into the room.

The squatting man straightened and held out his hands pacifically. "Now let's not get excited. Everyone stay calm and no one will get hurt."

Gideon turned slightly to face him, still blocking Deborah's path, very much aware of the man in the doorway holding the pistol. "Where's our daughter? What have you done to her?"

The unarmed man pointed at the table. "She got frightened when Idiot Boy over there banged the door open. She's hiding under the table."

Gideon felt himself being pushed forward, and Deborah rushed across the room, dropping quickly to her knees at the far end of the table. Annoyed though he was at her not staying behind him, Gideon realized that she'd had the sense not to cross the line of fire. She'd detoured around the far end of the sofa to get to Mattie, and he could now hear her gently coaxing the little girl to come out from her hiding place.

Turning his attention back to the large man standing in front of him, Gideon noted that despite his size and thuggish appearance, there was a spark of intelligence behind the man's brown eyes. This wasn't just a heavy, all brawn and no brain. This guy could think for himself.

"So answer my first question. And while you're at it, explain why Idiot Boy has a gun pointed at me."

The thug in the doorway frowned, slowly. It was obvious that his thought processes moved with the speed of sludge, and if his IQ were a temperature, it would barely read lukewarm. Idiot Boy would always work for someone else, never for himself. He'd been hired for his muscle, not his sparkling intellect. But hired by whom?

The big man tried to wave Gideon toward the sofa where Deborah now stood, holding a sniffing Mattie in her arms. The retired Captain hid a smile as he noticed that his wife was still staying well out of the line of fire, in a position where she could drop to her knees, hiding herself and Mattie behind the heavy sofa in an instant if she needed to. Deborah hadn't spent seven years married to an Earthforce officer for nothing.

"Let's all sit down and I'll explain." The big man waved his hand at the sofa again. Gideon shook his head, refusing to shift from his position in front of the bedroom door. No need to bring the potential targets any closer to each other.

"Explain and I'll think about sitting. Or you can tell Idiot Boy to shoot me, if you prefer."

A rumbling sound from the door to the corridor took both Gideon and the big man by surprise.

"Don't call me that. It's not polite." The voice was so deep it almost resonated inside Gideon's chest. He hid another smile as the big man moved to his companion, apologizing for the name calling, then telling him to step out into the corridor and guard the door from outside.

"I'll be OK in here, Harry. The nice Captain and his wife are going to behave themselves, and everyone will be just fine." As the big man ushered Idiot Boy out of the door--[Harry. Call him Harry. Idiot Boy isn't polite,] Gideon almost grinned as he remembered the rumbled words--Gideon pondered on what he'd just learned. They knew who he was and they knew that Deborah was his wife. Interesting.

He turned and asked his wife quickly, while the big man was preoccupied, "Is she all right? Did they hurt her?"

Deborah shook her head. "She's just a little scared."

Mattie lifted her head and looked tearfully at her father, struggling in her mother's arms and reaching out for Gideon. "Daddy. I want my Daddy."

As the big man came back into the room, Gideon held his hand up, telling Mattie to stay with her mother for the moment. "I'll hold you in a minute, pumpkin, but just now, stay with Mommy." Although the big man appeared unarmed, there was no telling what weaponry he might be carrying, and Gideon still didn't want to present him with a single target by moving too close to his wife and daughter.

Deborah nodded, understanding what he wanted her to do, and she held Mattie tightly, whispering reassurances to the frightened little girl.

The big man walked toward Gideon, again holding his hands up in a peaceful gesture. "Look, I'm sorry your daughter was frightened. I didn't mean that to happen. Whatever you might think, I don't go around hurting kids. I'm paid to do a job and that's what I'm doing. So if you'll just co-operate, no one will get hurt."

Gideon glanced quickly at Deborah and she gave him a tiny nod. Her empathic powers may have diminished but she could still sense if someone was telling the truth at close quarters. This man wasn't lying.

"So what's the job, and who's paying you?"

The man again tried to gesture Gideon toward the sofa, but he stood firm. After a few seconds stand off, the big man sighed and shrugged. "The job is to take you to another room, where you'll wait until the Boss is ready for you. Your wife and daughter will stay here, where they'll be safe and well taken

care of."

Gideon laughed in his face. "Oh yeah, that's going to happen. I'm going to walk quietly out of that door, leaving my wife and daughter alone and unprotected, when we now know there are armed thugs running around the castle. Dream on."

The big man's face fell into sorrowful lines. "I hope I can persuade you otherwise, Captain, because I may not go around hurting kids, but some of the other guys don't have my ethical standards. And they're the ones who have your son."

The ensuing silence was interrupted by a sharp intake of breath. Gideon turned to look at his wife and saw she had gone completely white. "He's telling the truth, Matthew. They have Marcus."

Demon hugged her daughter tightly against her chest and tried to hold all her fears in check. She couldn't afford to start broadcasting her panic while holding Mattie so close. She closed her eyes, blocking out the tirade of abuse her husband was heaping on their captor, and linked with her son again.

[[Marcus, are you all right? Have they hurt you or any of the others?]]

Marcus' voice was soft and distant. Since Galen's attack their link was weaker, and it was an effort to send so far. [[None of us is hurt, although Nima is crying. Dasha just sent me a thought that she's putting it on, trying to distract the people who are holding us. He tried to get Flynn to cry, too, but she won't.]]

Demon didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the tone of disgust that came so clearly through her son's thoughts, but she controlled herself as he went on, [[They're bringing us back to the castle. They're too big for us to fight, and there's one of them for each of us. I wanted to fight anyway, but Dasha said it would be silly. We should wait for a better chance.]]

Sending silent thanks for Dasha's good sense, Demon thought quickly. [[Do as you're told and don't get into trouble. As soon as we know what's going on, I'll link again. Be good, and try not to be scared. Send again if anything changes.]] She tried to sound full of confidence, knowing that beneath his bluster, her son was afraid of the people pushing and shoving him and his cousins back toward the castle.

Marcus let out a little snort of contempt. [[Me? Scared? Ha! It's the girls who are scared, not me and Dasha.]]

Demon sent a wave of love to her son and broke the connection. With a huge mental effort, she began trying to send to her sister. It was difficult to make contact with Angel when they couldn't see each other, but Demon knew she had to try. She had to warn somebody about what was happening to them. Half-aware that Matthew and the big man were still arguing, if in somewhat less furious tones, Demon focused all her strength on making a link with her sister.

Gideon narrowed his eyes and glared at the big man, who had finally introduced himself as Sol. "So the deal is that if I come with you, Lily and the children will be brought here, where they'll be safe? And you'll take me to the same place where you're keeping John and Luke."

He'd been stalling, arguing, waiting for Deborah to open her eyes again, well aware that she was

probably trying to link to Marcus and Angel.

"That's the deal. Look, Captain. I have my orders. No one needs to get hurt here. The Boss just wants to talk to you without the distractions of the women and kids around. That's all. He's got an offer he wants to make you, but he needs your undivided attention. So, do you come peacefully, or do I get Harry back in here and we'll carry you? If we do that, you're going to get hurt. Of course, there's a possibility I might get hurt, and Harry might get hurt, too, but that's just a possibility. I can guarantee that you'll get a world of pain if you don't co-operate."

Sol's face went hard, and Gideon could see he meant what he said about the pain. He just didn't know whether to believe him about the rest of it. [Come on, Deborah. Cut the calls short!]

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Gideon saw Deborah's eyes open. Her face showed the strain of the efforts she'd had to make to send her thoughts, and Gideon wondered whether she'd been successful. At least she was now listening to what he and Sol were discussing.

"OK, let me make sure I understand this." Gideon repeated the terms of the deal for Deborah's benefit, and waited for Sol to confirm his understanding. A quick glance at his wife was sufficient to verify that Sol was telling the truth.

"You have a deal, Sol, but let me tell you something. If you harm a single hair on my wife's head, or if my children are so much as shaken or scared, I'll find a way back here, and I'll rip your head off and use it for a bowling ball. If you've never believed anything in your life before, believe that." Gideon drawled the words out slowly, and was rewarded by seeing Sol pale a little. "Now, I'm going to say goodbye to my wife."

Gideon crossed the room quickly, and took Deborah into his arms, holding Mattie tight between them. The little girl wriggled around and clung to her father's neck, whimpering, "Hold me, Daddy."

"Just for a minute, pumpkin, then I have to go." He looked up into Deborah's golden eyes, and saw all the fear there that she was keeping from her face. Leaning his head into her neck he whispered, "Don't worry. I've got out of worse messes than this one. Did you make contact with Marcus?" Deborah gave an almost imperceptible nod, but remained silent as he went on, "Is he OK?" She nodded again. "Angel?" This time there was a tiny shake. "Keep trying." Another nod.

Pulling back, Gideon looked into his wife's eyes and smiled. "I love you. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Somehow Deborah summoned a smile as she whispered back, "Don't do anything stupid. I want you back with all your bits intact."

It was a brave attempt at humor, and Gideon gave her one last hug, before the sound of Sol's throat being cleared behind them made it obvious that it was time to go. He released his wife and strode toward the big man, saying, "Let's go see what this mysterious Boss of yours wants, shall we?"

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