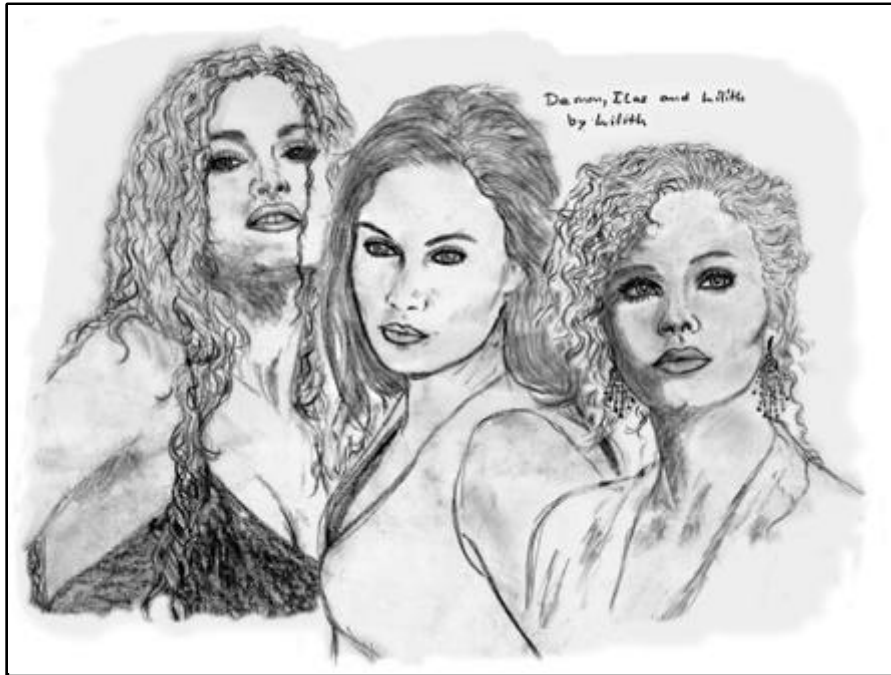


# The Witches of Eriadne: Toil and Trouble - Part 5: Breaking Away

by [The Space Witches](#)

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Demon, Ilas and Lilith by Lilith

## Chapter 3

Lily stood in front of the mirror in her walk-in wardrobe, torn between laughing and crying. While she was overjoyed that Luke would stay, the thought of losing John once again was devastating. Tonight was their last night before the Excalibur's shuttle would come and take him away from them, and both Luke and she had agreed that they would make it a special night for him. [Pull yourself together, for his sake! He's worse off than Luke and me, after all!]

She looked over her reflection in the mirror, a smile creeping onto her face as she imagined how John--and Luke--would react to her outfit. She had taken her hair up at the sides and affixed it to the top of her head with an emerald green hair clip that had a beaded fringe in red, green, and gold, which accentuated the matching earrings that hung almost to her shoulders. She wore a dancing costume, similar to a certain kind of Earth belly-dancing costumes--not the "bikini" kind, but a one piece. It was made of red panne velvet that followed her body's every curve without being uncomfortable or restraining, even in her present condition.

The shoulders were open on top, while their base connected the long pointed-tip sleeves to the rest of the costume. Her cleavage and the snake tattoo showed through a tear-shaped opening lined with green satin and red beads, and the sides of the hips were open, too, with a transparent insert to hold top and

skirt together, revealing just enough of her skin to ignite a man's imagination. The connection in front and back showed a beaded diamond shape of red, gold, and green. The skirt was tight at the hips and flared out towards the hem. When she swirled around, it opened like a bell to reveal inserts of shimmering green material, as well as tinkling golden anklets on her tiny feet, connected to her middle toes with a ring.

Lily stopped and stood so she could look at her profile, giggling at the unusual sight of her pregnant body in this costume. She lovingly stroked her belly. [You two are beautifully wrapped, and I know your fathers will love the sight!] Finally she took one last deep breath, stretching her spine and taking on a dancer's stance and aura, then gracefully stepped toward the door in her bare feet.

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John and Luke were sitting on the edge of the lounging pit, talking about the planet's climate while they were waiting for Lily. They both wore clothes that Lily had given them. John's shirt was red and Luke's was a medium blue, and both wore black pants.

When Luke saw Lily enter the room, his breath caught in the middle of the sentence, and he smiled. John, who was sitting facing away from the wardrobe door, turned around and gasped when he saw Lily standing next to the bed. He could feel his heart beat faster as he let his eyes wander over her. The smooth, slightly shimmering fabric molded her curves, and the colors were perfect for her.

"Most exquisite," he heard Luke say, and could only nod in agreement. He thought he had never seen a more beautiful woman, and her pregnancy only seemed to increase her beauty. [Like a Goddess.]

Lily smiled at them in a way that made his breath catch, then did a small curtsy before slowly and gracefully stepping behind the bed, her anklets tinkling slightly. She moved her hand before the blank wall in a strange gesture, almost as if picking something up and then offering it to someone. To both men's amazement, a data crystal player appeared, and Lily inserted a crystal she had held in her hand. She stepped into the middle of the room, simply standing there in a regal pose, expressing so many things by just being there. Then a lone flute began playing, a slow, calm melody, and Lily moved only her arms to it, perfectly, flowing as smoothly as the melody itself, from her shoulders to the tips of her fingers. Other instruments joined in, something resembling a guitar, or maybe an oud, and soft percussion.

A woman's voice started singing in a foreign language, full of desire and longing, and Lily expressed these feelings in her every move, the expression on her face, and the look in her eyes. Both men were captivated, never letting their eyes wander off her. While she danced, Lily slowly moved nearer and danced around the lounging pit once, then stopped before her lovers, leaning forward and framing their faces with elegant hand movements while looking at them longingly, lovingly, but never touching. She stepped back a little, her hips shimmying softly up and down, then moving in what seemed to be a figure of eight pattern, smoothly passing into a small full circle. John was amazed how it was possible that only her hips were moving while the rest of her body was practically still.

The voice faded, and the instruments did, too, one after the other, until again only the flute was playing. With its last descending notes, Lily bent forward and softly pressed her lips onto John's, but retreated as soon as he reacted, and before he knew what was happening, he felt a blindfold being put over his eyes and tied at the back of his head. At the same moment, he felt the emotional atmosphere emanating from Lily and Luke change and become more intense and focused.

"Don't worry," Lily whispered into his ear in a low, seductive voice, "Just relax and enjoy. Tonight's

your night."

He felt her lips touch his again, then Luke's, and heard Lily's anklets tinkle as she walked away - [Toward the bed?] While she seemed to do something there, he felt a gentle touch at his shoulder, and heard Luke's low voice say, "Come." He got up and was led toward the sound of Lily's anklets tinkling.

He was turned around, then felt Luke move behind him and take hold of his arms, fixing them behind his back so he couldn't move, yet careful not to hurt him.

"Relax, and don't make any abrupt moves," Luke whispered.

John's senses were alert, but he tried to keep his shields up, not wanting to find out what his lovers had planned for this night by picking up a stray thought. Suddenly, he felt cold metal touch his throat and gasped, realizing it must be Lily's dagger.

"Shhhh. You know I won't hurt you," Lily whispered, then added with a purr, "much."

John felt his pulse race as he remembered his first 'close encounter' in the dungeon, with Lily and her dagger. Again he felt the dagger's tip slowly wander down his throat, then it moved, and after a moment, he could feel or hear the first button of his shirt being cut off, which was followed by the next, then the next, until all were gone. John couldn't help but lean back into Luke with every cut.

"Still don't trust me, Sweet-Face?" Lily softly chuckled as she pushed the red fabric to the sides with her dagger, lightly tracing its tip along his skin, making him gasp as she revealed his smooth chest. She leaned close to him, making him feel her hard nipples press against his naked chest through the soft velvet of her dress, and said in a raw whisper, "But I think you like what I do to you. Don't you?"

Her hands, empty now, slipped around his ribcage under the shirt, and she began tracing her lips and tongue along his right collarbone, giving special attention to the point where neck and shoulder connected, drawing a soft moan from him, then she moved to his left side and gave it the same treatment in reverse order. Her mouth wandered down and across his chest, pausing at each nipple to tease, suckle, and bite, making him shudder with pleasure.

John sharply drew in his breath when he felt Luke graze his teeth along his neck and shoulder. His cock was throbbing, and he moaned when Lily's lips brushed his crotch.

Lily knelt before him, looking up and smiling. "Are we impatient?"

John gasped as he felt Lily's fingers softly stroke the bulge in his pants. "Please," he whispered.

Lily had intended to tease him some more, but the desire in his voice made her feel hot all over. She looked at Luke and nodded, and he laid John down on the bed while Lily took the silk scarves she had prepared earlier. Having removed his pants, she bound John's hands to the bedposts, and Luke did the same with his feet, careful to give him just enough slack. They had taken the cushions away, John noted, then realized why when one was put under his hips. Again his lovers kissed him, then Lily straddled his hips, sliding his hard cock into her wet center and moving her hips softly, making him moan. He felt the bed shift beneath his legs, and then a lubricated finger probing his anus, soon replaced by Luke's cock gently pushing inside him. John gasped. The double stimulation drove him further toward release.

Lily felt Luke's chest against her back, and while he gently thrust into John's ass, his left hand cupped

her breast, and his right slid between her legs, stimulating her clitoris, drawing out even more of her juices. She moaned loudly when Luke traced kisses along her neck.

John felt Lily slam down onto his cock each time Luke thrust into his ass; her fingernails raked his chest, and he didn't doubt that they would leave a few scars to remind him of this night. Their rhythm increased, and when Lily bent down and bit his left nipple, the muscles of her vagina spasming around his cock, John came hard, feeling Luke explode inside his ass a moment later. After his two lovers collapsed onto him, ragged breathing and gasps were all that could be heard for a while.

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Gideon sat across the table from Deborah, watching her as he drank his wine. They'd decided to spend their last evening alone, having dinner on the terrace outside her rooms. The terrace was lit with candles and lamps again, as it had been the night of their dinner with Lily, John, and Luke, but this time the table had been kept small, just large enough for the two of them.

Deborah was wearing the same black velvet dress she'd worn when they'd eaten on the terrace before. He hadn't got the chance to take it off her that night, but was looking forward to correcting that omission. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, creating a cloud of gold that reflected the light from the candles and lamps; she'd never looked more beautiful to him.

Gideon thought back over the previous week as she'd recovered from the loss of her link to her sister. He knew the enormous effort it had cost Deborah to get over her grief but she'd made the effort for him. He could still see the pain and sadness in her eyes when she thought he wasn't looking, but she'd been determined that they should both enjoy the short time they had left.

Gideon's sense of duty had made him put out a call for assistance after Lucas had left with Angel, but he'd been unable to contact the Excalibur to alert them to what had happened on Eriadne. His ship, and apparently any other Earthforce ship, was out of range of the equipment they had installed in Deborah's room. The only ship likely to be within range was Galen's, and he wasn't answering.

So, unable to do anything else, Gideon had spent the time with his lover. They'd spent every moment of that time together. She stayed by Gideon's side as he'd received reports from his crew on the progress they'd made; they'd walked, talked, eaten and slept together, never being apart for more than a few moments. He wished they could continue like this, but knew that within twenty-four hours he'd be gone, leaving her behind. All he'd have would be the pictures he'd taken of her every day of his visit. Gideon had brought a holocamera with him and a good supply of data crystals to make sure he captured Deborah in every mood and look, to take with him when he had to leave. He'd nearly used up every crystal, but had space for just a few more shots. He debated whether he could possibly capture the luminous glow from her hair on a crystal and concluded, regretfully, that he couldn't.

Deborah watched him watching her and smiled as Gideon reached across the table for her hand, bringing it to his lips, then standing and pulling her to her feet. He moved to hold her tightly against him, saying, "Have you had enough to eat? Because I'm still betting that you don't have a thing on under that dress and this time I'm determined to check it out myself."

She leaned forward to kiss him, then smiled. "You'd lose your bet, but we haven't had dessert. Don't you want ice cream?"

Gideon bent his head to kiss her neck and shoulder. "Maybe later. Right now I want to see why I've lost. What do you have on under that dress? I didn't think you ever wore underwear. Hell, I didn't even

know you *owned* underwear!" His mouth worked its way back up her neck to her ear, sucking the lobe, then licking the outer shell. He felt her shudder with pleasure at the touch of his tongue.

Deborah laughed softly as she spoke. "Well, it can get chilly out here at night, so I thought a pair of woolen knickers--you know, nice big, comfortable gray ones--would go well with this outfit."

Gideon started to laugh. "Now this I've got to see!" He pulled her through the French windows and on into the bedroom.

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Demon followed where Matthew led and stood at the foot of the bed, smiling at him, as he came to a halt and turned, releasing her hand and pulling her into his arms again. He kissed her passionately and she felt his hands move to her back and start pulling on her dress zipper. She could feel herself becoming aroused as his hand moved down her back and the tight bodice of her dress loosened as the zipper was undone. Demon raised her hands to her breasts to hold the dress in place as Matthew reached the base of her spine and stepped back to look at her. She could see the desire in his face and eyes and glanced downwards. Yes, he was as aroused as she was.

Gideon pushed her out to arms' length, then spoke quietly, his voice rough. "Let me see." She could hear the speed of his breathing increase.

She took a further step away from him and let go of the top of her dress, which slid to the ground, creating a pool of blackness at her feet. Demon watched as Matthew's eyes raked her body, slowing at her breasts, the cleavage emphasized by a black satin, strapless bra, then moving down to her rounded belly and onto the tiny black lace g-string that barely covered her curls. Finally she watched him smile as his eyes took in the black lace-topped stockings she'd worn for him. She lifted her arms to push her hair back from her shoulders and saw Matthew catch his breath as he watched the effect this had on her breasts. Demon kicked off her shoes and moved back into his arms, which came around her and clasped her tightly, letting her feel his erection. He kissed her deeply, then pushed her out to arms' length again, inspecting every inch of her, before looking into her eyes and asking, "Will you let me take a picture of you? I want to remember you like this."

Demon smiled and kissed him, replying, "Of course." She found the idea of him taking pictures of her exciting. While Matthew went for the holocamera, she laid herself on the bed, spreading her arms wide, her head on the pillows, her hair flowing around her, her back to the mattress but her legs held together, curled to one side. She watched as he took the picture, becoming increasingly aroused. She wanted him so much that it almost hurt. This was their last night together and Demon didn't know how she was going to survive when he left, but this last night was going to be special.

She watched as he returned to the bed and quickly removed his shoes and clothes. She loved the sight of Matthew's naked body, long and lean, lightly muscled legs, arms, and shoulders. The soft hair on his chest always felt so good to touch. All she wanted was for him to take her, to make love to her, to be inside her.

Matthew started to kiss her shoulders, then moved to her breasts, pushing his hands under her to reach the clasp of her bra. She arched her back to allow him better access, stroking the skin on his back and shoulders as his lips and tongue played with her. Demon felt the clasp release and he lifted the bra away from her, immediately moving his mouth to her nipple. His hand moved down her body to her hip, stroking her skin so gently that she could hardly feel his touch. At the same time, his tongue was circling her nipple, flicking against the now-hardened tip.

Demon could feel herself becoming wet as he moved to her other nipple and started licking and sucking it vigorously. He'd now slipped his fingers under the thin lace side of her g-string and started to pull it downwards, but she couldn't wait for him to remove it. She entwined her fingers in Matthew's hair and pulled his head up so that he looked at her. His eyes were dark, the pupils dilated with lust. Demon whispered, "Tear it," and heard his breath catch as he realized what she wanted him to do. Gideon smiled as he looked at her and his fingers grasped the flimsy material at her hip and pulled sharply. The lace tore. He rolled away from her so he could get to her other hip, then repeated the motion. He pulled the shreds of material away from her, exposing her to his view and touch.

She parted her legs slightly in silent invitation and Matthew moved his hand to the inside of her thigh, sliding his fingers under the edge of her stocking and stroking the skin there. Demon felt herself get wetter inside and longed for him to move into her. He moved his mouth back to her breast and sucked gently on her nipple as his hand moved up her thigh and his fingers entered her. Her back arched and she groaned with pleasure as she felt him moving inside her.

She moaned her disappointment as she felt Matthew pull his hand and mouth away from her and he sat up. Looking up at him, Demon saw his mouth was curled into a wicked smile as he said, "I think it's time for dessert."

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Gideon looked down at Deborah as she lay on the bed. Her throat was flushed and her nipples erect. He could almost feel the heat she was generating. [Time to cool down a little.] He lifted himself from the bed and stood looking at her for a moment. She was frowning and looking annoyed, obviously not amused by this interruption. He smiled to himself and went through to the living room.

He returned a few moments later carrying the tub of ice cream they hadn't got to over dinner. He could see that Deborah was watching him carefully as he placed the tub on the table by the bed and opened the lid, then sat on the edge of the bed. Using the spoon he'd brought with him, Gideon lifted out a spoonful of the half-melted dessert and turned to offer it to her. As the spoon traveled toward her mouth, the ice cream dripped and landed on her shoulder. She shuddered slightly at the cold wetness against her skin, then took the spoon into her mouth, slowly sucking it to remove the contents, then licking it clean, her tongue running around the edge of the bowl. Gideon dropped his head to her shoulder and licked the spilled drops. He sat up and watched as Deborah licked her lips, then fed her another spoonful. This time some spilled from her mouth as she lay and the liquid ran down her chin. He leaned forward again, and licked from the edge of her lips, down her chin, and onto her neck.

He deliberately tilted the next spoonful as he carried it toward her mouth, spilling drops across her shoulder and neck, watching her shiver as each drop hit her skin. Gideon placed the spoon to Deborah's lips, then as she went to take it into her mouth, pulled it away. She lifted her head to reach it, and he let her take it into her mouth again, watching her suck and lick at the spoon, her tongue moving slowly and erotically around the edge. He bent his head and ran his tongue over her shoulder and neck, licking her clean again.

Deborah was watching his every move now, silently encouraging him. Gideon dipped the spoon into the ice cream, but this time didn't offer it to her mouth. Instead, he moved the spoon to her breast and slowly dripped the contents onto her nipple. Her back arched as the cold confection hit her hot breast and he heard her sharp intake of breath. The ice cream melted as it hit her skin and started to trickle down her side. He lowered his head to Deborah's breast and sucked and licked until all the ice cream was gone, then did the same to her other breast, noticing that her nipple, already hard from arousal,

hardened even more when the cold liquid hit it.

The last spoonful of the melted ice cream was dripped down from her breasts to her navel and onto her curved stomach, making her shudder from the cold, then moan with pleasure as he licked the dessert away.

Gideon put the spoon back on the table and lowered his head to hers, first darting his tongue along her lips, touching them, tasting the sweetness which lingered there, then as her lips opened under his, moving inside her mouth, touching his tongue to hers. As he deepened the kiss, he moved his hand back to her hip and again ran his fingers down her thigh, sliding inside the stocking and then stroking up to her labia. He pushed two fingers back inside her and started to gently move them there. He could feel how wet Deborah was--wet and ready. Her hips were lifting to meet the thrust of his fingers and he could hear how fast she was breathing now. Gideon pulled his fingers out and stroked her clitoris, then moved back inside her again, all the while kissing her deeply.

He felt Deborah's legs opening further, encouraging him to push deeper into her, stimulating her further, bringing her closer to climax. His cock was stiff, rubbing against her hip as he leaned over her; it was time to enter her.

Gideon knelt on the edge of the bed, then pulled himself over her, kneeling between her legs. He moved his hands down Deborah's thighs, feeling the soft silky texture of her stockings under his fingers, then the rougher texture of the lace tops as he moved his hands back up towards her center. He felt her lift her legs on either side of him, opening herself up to him, making herself ready to take him into her. Gideon leaned forward, placing a hand on either side of her, positioning his cock so it just touched the outside of her vagina. He felt Deborah lift up to take him into her and pulled back a little, just maintaining contact with her, but not actually entering her. The tip of his cock felt hot and wet where it touched her and he fought the urge to drive it into her as hard as he could.

He looked down at her face, seeing her flushed and her lips swollen. Her head was flung back and her breath came in pants as she lifted her hips again and tried to take him inside her. This time Gideon let her pull his cock into her a little, then pushed in further. Deborah was tight and wet and moaned her pleasure as he entered. He started to build the pace of his moves, and she matched him thrust for thrust. Eventually, he was deep inside her, thrusting slowly and steadily, building towards release. He felt her lift her legs and clamp them around his hips, drawing him even deeper. The texture of Deborah's stockinged legs against his back was intensely erotic, encouraging him to move faster and deeper. Gideon dropped his head to her breast and sucked at her nipple, then gently nipped the hardened tip between his teeth. He heard her gasp at the sensation this produced and felt her start to rotate her hips at the same time she thrust up and down.

Gideon released the nipple from his teeth and took as much of her breast as he could into his mouth, sucking hard and licking, then biting down. He felt Deborah's back arch and her vagina pulse around his cock as she climaxed. He pushed into her again and she came again. Each thrust lifted her back to the top of her orgasm, her vagina clamping down on his cock, bringing him with her, making him come, making him release everything he had deep into her, and squeezing him dry.

He lowered himself onto her, then rolled onto his back, still deep inside her, bringing her over on top of him. Deborah straddled him and lay on his chest, not moving as she recovered from their exertions, obviously enjoying the sensation of having him inside her. She never wanted Gideon to withdraw after making love, wanting him to stay inside her for as long as possible. On occasion, she'd made him hard again without his ever leaving her, by pulsing the muscles of her vagina until he stiffened. He wondered if she'd do that now.

Deborah pushed herself upright, still straddling him, and looked down into his eyes. Smiling at him, she kissed him gently and spoke. "I love you so much."

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It was very early morning, [But I prefer to call it very late night,] John thought, since this made the morning and inevitable separation from his lovers seem farther away from the moment. He lay on his side between Lily, who was facing him, and Luke, who had his arm wrapped around both of them. They had been making love for hours, taking catnaps in between, but soon a touch, a word, or a look would get them started again, until finally they were too exhausted to do anything but lie there in each others' arms.

John leaned on his left hand and languidly caressed Lily's hip with his right hand, looking off into the distance and musing, as his lovers did. None of them spoke, so as not to disturb the feeling of belonging they shared in silence. But gradually, slowly, the realization crept over them that this really was their last night together, that John would leave in a few hours, and none of them knew when he could come back.

Abruptly Lily sat up, the turmoil of emotions inside her making her restless. As if for support, she softly stroked her bulging belly, looking down at it with a sad smile.

Both men sat up, and John softly asked, "What is it, love?"

Lily looked at him for long seconds, her green eyes enormous and full of emotions, and sighed. "I wish I could send to you, share my feelings as I can with my sisters. Words are so clumsy."

John's eyes widened, and he turned to look at Luke, who smiled, then back at Lily. "But you can! We can merge--all three of us--if you are willing to let me in."

Lily knew what he wanted to do, and gave him a short nod. She deliberately relaxed as she felt his probing, then gasped as she heard him speak inside her head. *[[This feels interesting. It must be because of the Vorlon enhancements.]]* His voice was different, richer, with more layers to it than when he spoke out loud.

*[[Am I different?]]* Lily asked.

She saw and felt his smile as he said, *[[No. You are unique,]]* then added, *[[I'll bring Luke in.]]*

Luke's head twitched to the side slightly when John touched his mind, then he relaxed, and Lily could feel him join them. To be connected to both her lovers... *[[Ooh... this is so...]]* She couldn't find the right word, but the emotions she now shared with them were clear enough. Her heart seemed to flow over with love for these two men, and she could feel the same from them. Mixed with that love was the pain about their imminent separation.

Lily drew her lovers into her embrace, and they leaned their foreheads against hers, holding each other tightly in their circle. Lily closed her eyes, trying not to get overwhelmed by the emotions storming in on her.

*[[Don't cry,]]* she heard Luke's mind-voice, even richer than his normal one, and realized that tears were rolling down her face. Without looking she knew his eyes were filling too.



*[[I have to. I'm so happy, and so sad.]]*

*[[Don't be. I'll call whenever I can, and I'll come back as soon as possible.]]* Despite his words, John was on the verge of tears, and he felt Lily draw him into a mental hug, with Luke doing the same. He felt tears on his face, not sure if they were his own.

Emotions were flowing between them as they exchanged little reassurances--thoughts as soft as whispers, touches, kisses--all too aware that time was running out on them. They sank down on the sheets, their bodies entangled, making love again and again, intense as never before, and never losing their connection.

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Gideon awoke to the sound of thunder and realized it was the shuttle descending from the Excalibur. The vacation was over. He looked down to where Deborah lay with her head on his shoulder and he felt the warm wetness of her tears as they settled on his skin. He tightened his arm around her and wondered how he could comfort her when he felt in such dire need of comfort himself. The thought of leaving her had been bad enough, now the time had come and the reality was unbearable.

He kissed the top of Deborah's head and stroked her hair, trying not to think about how long it might be until he could do that again. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and overflowing, but she was desperately trying to smile at him. She kissed the side of Gideon's neck, then looked back up at him and whispered, "I keep telling myself that I should be glad for the time that we've had and look forward to when you'll come back, but it's hard."

Gideon moved his free hand to hold hers where it rested on his chest and he squeezed it tightly. His throat was too tight to speak at that moment. He kissed Deborah gently as a way to avoid speaking, and he felt her mouth open under his. Gentleness gave way to passion, and soon he was deep inside her again, lifting them both to a long, slow release of orgasm that left them both breathless, but deeply satisfied. When they'd finished, he lay beside her and rested his hand on her belly. Gideon smiled at her as he felt his son move under his hand. "See? He's kicking his father to say goodbye."

Deborah smiled back and rested her hand over his. "Hmm. Pity that he has to kick his mother in the process. Tell you what, I've done the first half of this pregnancy thing, why don't you take over now and you can do the second half? Nothing to worry about really, just a little thing called labor, you'll hardly notice it."

Gideon laughed and kissed her. "I can see myself trying to explain that one to Earthforce. And unless Raven has some way of doing the transfer in the next hour, we'll have to wait for the next one to try out that idea." He pushed back the bed covers and reluctantly got up, turning to look back at her as she lay naked on the bed.

She was trying to smile as she looked up at him and spoke. "Next one? I'll see how this one feels on his way out before I make any commitments, but when you come back," Deborah's voice cracked slightly and she swallowed before continuing, "we can have lots of fun practicing." She pulled herself up to join Gideon by the side of the bed and put her arms around his neck. "But we can practice a bit more in the shower now if you like."

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Lily walked between her lovers, holding their hands. They were the first to arrive; Lily abruptly stopped a distance from the shuttle, trembling not just from her lack of sleep. "I can't go on."

The two men looked at her, love and concern in their eyes, and she could feel John merge with her and Luke.

*[[Please. You know I can't stay, but I swear to you, Matthew, Max, and I will do whatever we can to get back before the birth of our children.]]*

*[[I know. But losing you again...]]* Lily's eyes filled with tears, and she threw her arms around John, pressing her face against his chest, feeling Luke wrap his arms around them both. They didn't send any more, for all words had been said the night before. They shared their emotions and their company for as long as they could. Then Gideon and Demon arrived, and with a mental sigh, John retreated slowly, and moved out of their embrace.

For a moment, Lily feared she'd break down, but Luke held her--as much for his support as for hers. She squeezed his hand in acknowledgment and made an effort to smile at John. "We'll be waiting for you," she whispered, her voice raw from unshed tears. *[I thought I'd cried all my tears last night.]*

Lily stepped forward, Luke's hand still on her shoulder, and looked up at John, her fingers tracing along every inch of his face, as if to memorize it. John bent down to kiss her one last time, then gave Lily's swollen belly a soft rub, and let Luke draw him into a tight embrace, brushing his lips in a soft, quick kiss.

"Don't forget."

John couldn't help but smile as he remembered the last time they had said goodbye. "Not as long as you don't."

He stepped back and nodded at them, then turned around and walked up the ramp, joining Max, who stood just inside the entry, looking out at the ones they had to leave behind. Gideon almost ran up the ramp and past them without turning back, his face a mask, but Matheson had known him for too long to not see the pain in his eyes. As the ramp was raised, John sent *[[I love you,]]* then the door closed, cutting him off from his lovers.

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Ilas, Dureena, and Max arrived at the shuttle a short while after Lily, John, and Luke. They had taken a detour through the orchard to steal a few last private moments. Both Max and Ilas were relieved that Dureena would stay on Eriadne. They knew that beneath that thin shell of calm, the wound of her baby's death was still raw, and they hoped that a few months in Ilas' company would help heal that wound.

Max was still in awe of Ilas' persuasive skills. During dinner last night in her room-- Raven had let Dureena out of the infirmary the day before on the condition that she wouldn't be left alone--Ilas had asked Dureena how she would like to stay with her, eyes full of hesitant hope. Dureena had looked up from her plate at Ilas, then to Max and back at Ilas, clearly suspecting they had planned something behind her back, and just as clearly not liking their protectiveness. But before she could say anything, Ilas had continued, "Please, I know Max has to leave, but you don't have a career to worry about, and the medics won't let you help on missions for a few months anyway, and Raven said you need some rest, which you can get here. But most of all, I'm afraid the Excalibur won't make it back for the birth

of my baby, and I don't want to have it alone!" She'd paused, then added, "I don't want to be alone." She'd looked at Dureena so pleadingly that the Zanderi woman had been unable to refuse.

Now they were standing near Lily and Raven, who were holding Matheson silently, and Max found himself speechless, all the smart things he'd wanted to say gone with the wind.

Instead, Ilas said, "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Max managed to flash his best smile. "I hope so, because if not..." his voice failed.

Ilas put her arms around him, tears in her eyes. "Send a message whenever you can."

He nodded as she let go of him and stood back after giving him a soft kiss. In an emotional outburst, Dureena flung herself at Max, clinging to him for a second. Then she loosened her grip and whispered into his ear, "I'll take care of them, I promise."

Max smiled at her thankfully as she stepped back to Ilas' side. He was glad that Dureena had given this promise, not just for Ilas' and her baby's, but also for her own sake-taking care of someone would help the little Zanderi get over her own loss. Max wrapped his arms around the two women for the last time, whispering to them, then quickly turned around and walked toward the shuttle and up the ramp. He couldn't help turning around at the top and looking down at Dureena and Ilas, wondering how he would survive the coming months alone, not knowing when he would see them again.

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Gideon and Demon walked down to the shuttle, holding hands tightly. She used every ounce of control she possessed to keep smiling and to not break down. She had a pain in her stomach so intense that she could hardly breathe, but she did her best to ignore it, knowing that it was just the physical manifestation of her grief. Demon was determined that Matthew's last sight of her would be a happy one, that she wouldn't make it more difficult for him by getting hysterical, no matter how much she wanted to scream at him not to leave her. He had no choice in the matter and neither did she.

The others were gathered by the side of the shuttle, waiting quietly. Raven and Lily stood to one side, both holding Matheson tightly. Demon was happy for Lily and relieved for them all that Raven had decided to stay. His presence would be a comfort, even to the men who were leaving. Knowing that their women had access to a good doctor was reassuring.

Ilas stood with Max and Dureena. It was the first time that Dureena had left the castle since the death of her baby. She still looked pale and fragile, but her anger simmered just below the surface. Demon hadn't dared speak to her, knowing that Dureena blamed Angel for her loss. Nothing Demon could say would convince Dureena that Angel couldn't have known what would happen when she brought Lucas back. This was an issue that would have to be dealt with, as Dureena had agreed to stay with Ilas until the Excalibur returned.

Thinking of Angel made the pain in Demon's stomach worse. She felt as if there were a hole in her mind and her soul where her sister's presence had been ripped out, and she knew that the hole was about to widen when Matthew left. A wave of grief and loneliness swept over her, strong enough to make her stumble as her knees weakened. Gideon caught her and pulled her to him, looking closely at her, trying to see what she was feeling. Demon smiled and made an extra effort to sound normal. "If I start falling over now, heaven knows what I'll be like when I can't see my feet any more." She knew

that she wasn't fooling him in the slightest, but continued to make the effort.

They reached the foot of the ramp and Gideon turned to take Demon in his arms, holding her as tightly as he could without hurting her. His face was buried in her hair as he kissed her neck, then he moved his head to kiss her mouth. Their last kiss was long and passionate, but eventually he lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "I wish that I could promise to be back before he's born, but I won't promise what I don't know I can deliver." Demon nodded her understanding, unable to speak. Gideon continued, "But I'll do everything I can to get here, and I'll send a recorded message whenever I can, every day if I can. Will you do the same?" She nodded again as he carried on. "We'll be out of range so we can't talk, but at least if I get your messages, I'll know that you're all right and be able to see you."

Demon was now struggling to hold back tears, the lump in her throat was nearly choking her as Matthew leaned his face back into her hair. His mouth pressed against her ear and he whispered, "I love you." He let go of her and turned abruptly, almost running up the ramp and into the shuttle, where Matheson and Max stood watching. Gideon didn't turn or look back, but just disappeared inside as the ramp was raised and the door closed.

Luke and Lily walked over to where Demon stood, frozen to the spot, while Ilas and Dureena held each other tightly, both crying softly. Demon's smile had faded and her face was locked into an impassive stare. Lily put her arm around her big sister's waist and leaned her head against her arm. Demon felt Luke move to stand on her other side and his arm went around her shoulders as they watched the shuttle take off. As it grew smaller and finally vanished into the distance, Lily tried to comfort Demon as she had before.

"Let us help you, Demon. You don't have to be alone. We're here for you."

Demon made a supreme effort and spoke quietly. "I know you are, darling, and thank you, but right now I think I'd like a little time to myself." She turned and walked back to the castle alone, her back straight and her head high, tears streaming down her frozen face.

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Toil and Trouble

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