

The Witches of Eriadne: Toil and Trouble - Part 3: Out and About

by [The Space Witches](#)

[Chapter 1](#) [Chapter 2](#) {Chapter 3}



Max, Dureena and Ilas

Chapter 3

At first light they had stood over the hole. Max had equipped them all with ropes and flashlights, and he knelt, trying to shine a light into the hole. "I can see stairs going down. There must be a proper entrance here somewhere." He could only just get his head through the hole; the entrance was far too narrow for his shoulders.

As he sat up, Ilas stepped forward. "Let me try."

Max watched in awe as Ilas shrank before his eyes. Within seconds she was a child-sized miniature of her normal self, with a potbelly. He eyed her stomach, wondering if it would fit through the narrow gap, and was concerned about sending her into the unknown alone. "Are you sure about this, Ilas? I don't like the idea of you risking yourself or the baby."

Ilas stood on tiptoe and stretched her arms. She could just reach his neck, and she pulled his head down into a kiss. Releasing his mouth, she giggled as she said, "I'll be fine, Max. Stop worrying so much." She turned and headed toward the hole.

Max and Dureena secured a rope around Ilas, then lowered her through the hole. She just barely made it through, although Max winced as she saw her stomach press against the edge. He put his head down the hole after her descent and watched as she stood below, shining her flashlight around.

"Ah!" He heard her exclamation as she disappeared from view. He couldn't get his head around far enough to see where she had gone.

"Ilas! Get back here where I can see you!"

Her voice echoed back at him. "I'm fine, Max. Stop being so over-protective!" He heard a groaning, rasping sound behind him and pulled his head out of the hole. Dureena spun around as a piece of ground behind her began to heave and quiver. Max and Dureena rushed to the spot and started to tear the vegetation away. A trapdoor popped open suddenly, and Max sat back on his heels as the biggest Narn head he had ever seen was thrust through the opening. The Narn grinned at him and giggled.

"Hi, Max! Wait there a minute, there's a ladder." The Narn head disappeared and the top rungs of a ladder appeared through the trapdoor. Max quickly scrambled down, turning on his flashlight as he went, with Dureena following close behind.

When he reached the foot of the ladder, Ilas appeared in front of him, back in her normal shape and size. He heard Dureena grumbling behind him and turned, pulling Ilas to his side and kissing her as he did so. "What was that you said, Dureena?"

"I said that I could have been the most successful thief in the galaxy if I could do that! I would have been Chief of the Thieves Guild by now. Are you sure you don't want a career in thievery, Ilas? You'd be very good at it."

Ilas giggled and snuggled against Max. "Demon says it's wrong to steal. She'd be cross with me."

Max gritted his teeth and promised himself that one day he'd help Ilas become more independent of her sisters. The thought of Gideon's woman dictating to the mother of his child stuck in his throat. Gideon had enough control over Max's life as it was. Max saw no reason for him to have a greater influence.

"Let's see what we've got." Max led the way down the stairs.

Lily awoke when someone kissed her softly. She opened her eyes to see Luke sitting on the edge of the mattress, smiling down at her. He was already dressed. "Good morning, Fire Lily."

"Good morning, Sad Eyes." She murmured and smiled up at him, reaching out and pulling him down for another kiss.

John stirred and turned around, still sleepy. "Who brought the sun out in the middle of the night?" he mumbled.

Luke smiled and Lily laughed lightly, then she carefully turned on her side and softly placed her lips on his. "Good morning, Sweet Face."

He smiled and answered, "Morning," then sat up slowly, stretching.

"Hey, my turn!" Luke protested, grinning widely, and bent over Lily to kiss John. "Good morning."

"Let's hope it will be," John answered, looking at Lily, an encouraging smile on his lips.

Luke stroked her cheek, seeing anxiety seep into her eyes. "Let's get it over with, shall we?"

Lily nodded. Pushing herself up, she got out of bed and hurried to her walk-in wardrobe to get something simple to put on.

Lily sat on a stretcher in the infirmary, wearing a long skirt with elastic waist and a matching flowing blouse, both eggshell white and adorned with lace at the hem. John, who stood beside her, thought it was the first time he'd seen her wear something that hid her wonderful cleavage, but he understood that she'd been too anxious to fiddle with more complicated clothes. Only her dangling feet betrayed her nervousness, those and her eyes, which followed Luke's every move as he mentally went through the procedure of the test again. It was really simple, and Lily and he had gone through it together in theory, but he could not and would not allow himself to make a mistake.

Finally he looked up and met Lily's eyes. "OK, ready to go," he said, trying not to sound as nervous as he felt.

John squeezed her hand. She smiled at each of them in turn then took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

The device fitted into Luke's hand and had several buttons in the lower half, and a display in the upper half. All he had to do was hold it against Lily's belly and push the red button in the center. The scanner recognized her as pregnant, registered the number of babies (two), their sex (one boy and one girl), and analyzed each one's genetic make-up in a matter of seconds. At the same time, it checked for health problems, but none were apparent. Then he aimed it at John, pushed the blue button below the red one, and the analysis appeared immediately, including the match to each baby's gene pattern in percentage terms. Luke kept his face impassive, a mask of concentration, having a hard time ignoring Lily's and John's anxious faces. Then, he held the scanner against himself, careful that the others couldn't see the display, and pushed the blue button again, but this time he couldn't prevent the edges of his mouth from twitching when he stared at the results. He felt his heart beating fast, and pushed another button to recalculate the results. Still the same.

"LUKE!" Lily's voice betrayed how desperate she was.

Luke swallowed hard and looked up. He started talking, but found his voice was raw, and cleared his throat. "Mother and children are perfectly well. What is it with you sisters that everybody seems to be sickeningly healthy?" He paused a heartbeat, then continued, "Seems like John will have a son, and I'll have a daughter." Luke could hear how amazed he sounded -- he knew that it was possible, but very uncommon that non-identical twins had different fathers. [Well, the likelihood of it happening in our case was rather high, considering our sharing.]

John let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd held and leaned against the stretcher, feeling slightly dizzy now that the strain of not knowing was over.

Lily jumped down from the stretcher, green eyes blazing, hands covering her mouth, and then grabbed Luke's arm. "Are you sure?"

Luke showed her the display, smiling, and she started trembling with relief when she saw the results. "Oh, Dear Goddess... they're ours! They *really* are ours!"

Luke threw the scanner on the stretcher and swept her up, whirling her around in a circle, laughing, then put her down carefully and hugged her as tightly as he dared. John took over when Luke let go of

her, cupping Lily's face and covering her mouth with his in a slow, deep kiss. Then he looked at Luke, seeing his own silly grin reflected in the doctor's face. The two men embraced, then pulled Lily into their arms, and stood holding each other for a long while. Lily suddenly jerked her head back, eyes wide. "She kicked! Our daughter kicked!" She held her hand against the right side of her belly, and then suddenly changed to the left side. "And our son isn't far behind!" She'd seen the position of the babies on the scanner's display, and was therefore able to tell which was which.

The two men gently put their hands on her belly, looking up at her in amazement as first the boy, and a few seconds later, the girl kicked again. Another round of laughs and hugs followed. Suddenly Lily groaned, "I'm hungry! I feel like I have a hole in my stomach!"

Luke laughed. "You're right, time for breakfast!" He quickly put the scanner back in its place then they left the infirmary for the main dining room, holding hands, their spirits high.

When they came near Angel's room, Lily said, "Go on, you two. I have to see how Angel feels."

Both men frowned. "Are you sure?" Luke asked.

Lily stopped in front of Angel's door and smiled at them. "She's my sister."

Luke exchanged a look with John, who arched his eyebrows, then he nodded. "Don't take too long, or you'll only get the leftovers."

Lily waited until she couldn't hear her lovers any more, and a few seconds longer, then knocked on the door. This was something the sisters usually didn't do amongst themselves, but she didn't want to invade Angel's grief and anxiety. When Angel didn't answer, she pushed down the handle, but found the door locked. "Angel? I know you're in there! Let me in!" Still no answer. She knocked again. "Angel, please!" She couldn't hear a sound.

Finally, she reached out with her mind. *[[Angel, let me in! You can't keep this up; it's not good for you to be alone so much! Why don't you come eat breakfast with John, Luke, and me? Just us!]]* She didn't say anything about Demon's collapse, but the images played in her mind while she 'talked' to Angel, so surely Angel had seen them, too.

When she finally answered, Lily could feel a lot of guilt and a deep sadness, but also gratitude. *[[Please, just leave me alone. I... I can't.]]*

Lily tried to get her to change her mind, but Angel wouldn't answer anymore. She sighed and started walking away, then turned back around and sent, *[[If you need me, I'll be here,]]* before she followed Luke and John.

When Gideon awoke the next morning, he found that Deborah had slid across the bed and now had her head on his chest, her leg hooked over his and her arm across him. He felt her mouth at his nipple and her hand gently stroking his stomach, moving down toward the erection he'd awoken with. He lay still as she moved her head down his body and moaned with pleasure as she took him into her mouth,

licking at the tip of his cock, sucking gently, while stroking his balls. He felt himself swell and stiffen even more as she played with him. After a while, she moved her head back and pulled herself up the bed, trailing kisses up his stomach and chest until she reached his neck and face.

Gideon rolled onto his side and pulled her close to him, taking her mouth with his and kissing her deeply. His hand moved to her breast, circling her nipple, which hardened under his touch. Moving his hand down over her belly to her hip, he pushed gently until she rolled onto her back, then he started to kiss her neck and shoulder, while moving his hand farther down. Deborah's legs opened to allow him to stroke the inside of her thigh, then he slipped a finger inside her. Her back arched and he heard her gasp of pleasure as his finger moved inside her, feeling her wet and soft under his touch. He pulled his hand away, then shifted to lie on top of her.

Deborah parted her legs and lifted her knees as Gideon positioned himself to enter her. Pushing gently in, he moved slowly, allowing her walls to stretch to accommodate him, careful as always not to hurt her. He could feel her hips pushing up against him as she took him deeper inside her, her vagina pulsing in time with his thrusts. He gradually increased the pace as he felt her lifting toward climax, taking him with her, until he felt her back arch and her muscles clamped down on his cock as she came. He let go and came with her. As he did so, he was hit with a wave of emotion that turned his groan of pleasure into a scream of anguish.

Gideon's head was full of pain, a mixture of anger, hatred, loss, and grief that felt like a spike in his brain. He opened his eyes and looked down at Deborah's face beneath him, which was showing every emotion he was feeling. He realised that she was sending, and what she was sending were all the things she'd felt the previous night. She'd remembered.

Deborah's eyes were enormous with pain as they looked up at him. "You left me," she whispered and her voice cracked with loneliness. Gideon wrapped his arms around her, rolled onto his side, and held her as tightly as he could, hooking his leg over hers, so that he could get as much of their bodies in contact as he could.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Oh God Deborah, I'm sorry. I won't leave you again. I promise." She was shaking in his arms, wracked with sobs. Gideon kept holding her, stroking her hair and her skin, kissing whatever part of her he could, telling her over and over that he wasn't going to leave her ever again. All the time he knew he was lying, that in a few days he'd have to leave her and he had no idea when he could get back. But that was for later. For now, he just needed to try to lessen the terrible pain Deborah was feeling.

Gradually, her sobs diminished and she turned her face up to him. Her eyes were red and swollen, her nose was red and running, and Gideon thought she'd never looked so beautiful. He watched as she wiped her nose with the back of her hand, making her look about ten years old. He kissed her forehead and relaxed his hold, bringing a hand up to wipe her cheeks.

Deborah looked at him seriously as she asked, "Where's Angel? Did you find her?"

He could see her concern for her sister in the wary way she looked at him, "Yes, and she's in her rooms -- at least she was when I left her." Gideon could see her unspoken questions. "I tried to talk to her, Deborah, to make her see that she has to stop doing these things to herself and to you. As usual, we got in a fight, so I left. It was only when I got back that I found out that you'd been ill. I'm so sorry. I should have been here with you." He felt her pushing at his chest, trying to get away from him.

"I should go to her. She must have been in awful pain to say such a dreadful thing."

Gideon tightened his grip, refusing to let her go. "Not now. You're not going anywhere yet. You're staying right here until Raven says you're fit. No arguments, OK?" He smiled down at her and kissed her gently.

Deborah smiled back tentatively and spoke. "But I'm hungry."

He laughed softly and hugged her. "You're *a/ways* hungry these days. I'll go order us some breakfast, then I'm coming right back. Don't move." Gideon released his tight hold of her and rolled to the side of the bed. Grabbing a robe on his way, he went through to the living room and used the Comm. unit to order them breakfast. He was just returning to the bedroom when he heard a quiet knock at the outer door. Upon opening it, he found Raven standing outside.

Raven looked carefully at him and spoke quietly, "How is she this morning?" Gideon gestured him to come in.

"Go see for yourself. I'm glad you came by. I wanted you to have a look at her." He held his hand up to stop Raven from moving into the bedroom. "But before you go in, you ought to know that she remembers everything that happened and she wants to see Angel. I've stopped her so far, but I want to keep her away from her sister at least for the moment. Will you back me up and tell her to stay put for a while?"

Raven nodded. "I agree. I think she should rest for this morning, at the very least. Keep her in bed for now and see if she's fit to get up this afternoon." He followed Gideon into the bedroom, where Demon had propped herself up on the pillows with the quilt pulled up to her shoulders.

She smiled at Raven as he entered. "I thought I heard your voice. Have you come to check up on me? I'm fine now, honestly."

Raven thought Demon still looked pale and the dark circles under her eyes gave the lie to her last statement, but he smiled back. "And when did you get your medical qualifications? I'll be the judge of whether you're fine or not." He watched as Gideon sat on the bed next to her, taking her hand and holding it tightly, while looking back at Raven.

"OK, let's check you out." Raven gave her a brief examination, making sure that all her vital signs were back to normal. When he finished, he smiled at Demon again. "Well, still sickeningly healthy, it seems, however you are tired and you do need to rest. I don't want you out of bed this morning, and I'd prefer it if you spent the entire day in bed. I'm sure Matt will be happy to keep you company."

He turned to look at Gideon, who raised an eyebrow at him and laughed. "Oh, I think I could manage that."

Raven turned back to Demon. "I've just left the others at breakfast in the dining room. They send their love and hope you will feel better soon. Why don't you join us there tomorrow when you're fully recovered?" He saw her expression change to one of anxiety and she spoke hurriedly.

"Was Angel with you? Is she all right?"

Raven sighed and shook his head. "No. Lily went to her rooms this morning, but Angel wouldn't come

out; she just asked to be left alone. That may be for the best at the moment. Leave her be for a little while, Demon. Let things calm down a bit." He watched as she bit her lip and nodded. He stood up and turned toward the door. "Well, I have three more pregnant women to look after, so I'd better get studying. I know you said this would be a working vacation Captain, but I didn't expect that I'd have to brush up on my Obstetrics. Call me if you need me."

Raven pulled the bedroom door closed behind him.

Gideon turned to Deborah as she relaxed against the pillows. "Hear that? Now you've got orders from the doctor as well as from the Captain. Are you going to follow them?" He slid across the bed to take her in his arms again. He felt her tuck her head against his shoulder, then chuckle.

"I love it when you're being all masterful. Go on, give me some more orders, Captain. See if you can make me obey."

When Luke came back to Lily's room, her first question was, "How is Demon?" She was sitting on the window seat with her harp, but had stopped playing and sat up straight when he entered. John sat opposite her, with a book in his hands and he looked up quickly with the same question in his eyes.

"She's OK, only tired. I told her to rest for the day." Luke put his bag in its usual place near the door.

Lily exhaled heavily with relief. Then her face brightened and she asked, "Why don't we leave the castle for a bit? There are times when the atmosphere here is so tense that I have problems breathing. Besides, I'd like to show you my favorite places outside the castle."

Luke almost blushed as he remembered when she'd caught him in her 'second favorite place' inside the castle during their first visit to Eriadne B. "Uh, yes, good idea. I'd really like to explore the landscape a bit," he said, walking over to them and sitting down when John made room for him on the window seat, softly touching Lily's right foot that peeked out from under the hem of her skirt. Lily giggled since it tickled.

John grinned at Luke as he said, "Yes, we may have had lots of exercise over the last few days, but a bit of fresh air would do us good, don't you think, Doctor?"

"Oh, I'd definitely recommend that," Luke paused a beat, "and it is a fact that exercising in fresh air is much healthier than inside."

He didn't manage to keep his face straight for long when both Lily and John were grinning widely at him.

"So it's unanimous. Great!" Lily said and started playing a light melody.

Lily had ordered food and everything else necessary for their picnic, and they packed it into two small backpacks. Before they left the castle, Lily sent a message to Demon telling her where they were going. She giggled when she got Demon's answer, and John asked her, "What is it?"

Lily giggled some more. "Only sister-talk." Demon's answer had contained annoyance at the fact that Gideon took Raven's order of having Demon rest for the day a bit too literally, but Lily was sure that Demon and Gideon would make up by the time she and her lovers returned to the castle. *[[Demon, why don't you two come for a late dinner tonight, in my room? That way you could get out after a full day's 'rest'.]]* She felt Demon's gratitude and relief when she agreed. *[[I'll let you know when we're on our way back so you can get ready. Have a nice quiet afternoon...]]*

The mental grin that accompanied this caused Demon to send back a sisterly, *[[I'll get you for this!]]*

Gideon leaned against the terrace balustrade thinking, [If I go back in there any time soon, I'll strangle her!] He looked out over the courtyard and the large tree growing there, beyond the castle walls to the woods where he'd spent the previous afternoon with Deborah. He calmed down as he remembered the time they'd spent together, enjoying each other's bodies and company. [So why is today so different? Why is she being such a pain in the butt?] He heard a movement behind him and turned to see her emerge from the French windows onto the terrace. She'd put on a simple black robe and was looking at him warily. Her pale gold hair was loose and falling in curls around her shoulders; in the sunlight it looked like a halo round her face. Deborah stopped several paces away from him and spoke.

"I'm sorry, I've been obnoxious, haven't I?" She looked apologetically at him.

"Obnoxious is a good word. So is fractious, irritable, peevish, bad tempered, annoying, exasperating, difficult, and petulant. Give me a moment and I'll think of some more. It's been a while since I had to stretch my vocabulary like this." Her head dropped and Gideon resisted the urge to go to her and hold her tight.

She spoke while looking at the ground. "I'm not used to being unwell and I'm not used to someone trying to take care of me. No one has ever done it before." She looked up and smiled tentatively, "But I'll try to get used to it if you'll give me another chance."

Gideon's resistance crumbled and he strode forward to take her in his arms and hug her tightly to him. He kissed her forehead. "Apology accepted. Didn't your mother ever tuck you up in bed when you weren't well?" He watched as her head dropped again, concealing her face from his view.

"No." Deborah pushed away from him and turned back toward her rooms.

"Hey, what did I do? Don't just walk away like that, at least tell me what's wrong." He grabbed her arm, turning her around toward him, and then moved her so that her back was pressed against the balustrade. He didn't want her to get away from him until they had this resolved. Gideon was startled to see that her eyes had filled with tears. [God help me-- it's the hormones again.]

She looked at him seriously. "You don't really want my life story, Matthew. It's not that interesting, but suffice it to say that I've always been used to looking out for myself. No one else has ever done it for me."

He kissed her lips gently. "Well, that just changed. I know you always look after your sisters. What I didn't know was that it was a life-long habit. But you'd better get used to the fact that there's someone else who's going to be looking out for you now." As Gideon spoke, his eyes were fixed firmly on hers. Deborah dropped her head to his neck and he kissed her forehead again. As he did so, he looked over

her head down into the courtyard and saw Angel standing by the tree, staring up at them. [Shit!] He was determined that Deborah shouldn't see her sister. Gideon knew that if Deborah turned now, she couldn't help but see Angel and would immediately want to go to her. He had to prevent that until she was more fully recovered. The only thing he could think of to make sure she didn't turn was to kiss her.

He pressed his mouth down to hers, gently pushing it open, seeking her tongue with his, deepening the kiss until he felt sure that he had her complete attention. All the while, Gideon's eyes were open, looking beyond Deborah at Angel standing in the courtyard, hoping that she'd give up and go away.

Angel entered the courtyard and stopped. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun, taking a deep breath, letting the fresh air clear her mind. All that morning, her mind had been filled with thoughts of Lucas and the dream. But she thought most about the possibility of bringing him back. She battled with herself about it. On one hand she couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't. If she did, then she wouldn't be alone. On the other hand, there was a small part of her that still held onto the hope that she could be with Gideon. She tried to understand why she still hoped for that. Didn't she just want him because he reminded her of Lucas? Didn't that mean it was Lucas who she really loved and wanted? She let out the breath she'd been holding, felt herself relax, and opened her eyes. As she did so, she saw movement. She looked up to see Gideon and Demon standing on the terrace. Her heart jumped to her throat, and not wanting to be seen as she observed them, she moved into the cover of the Koa tree.

She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could see how Gideon was looking at Demon. It hurt to see how much love was in his eyes, love that he would never feel for her. Angel continued to watch, feeling jealous, as Demon rested her head on his shoulder and he kissed her forehead.

Angel's eyes widened when she saw Gideon looking directly at her over Demon's head. Her first thought was to duck and hide, but she couldn't move as she watched Gideon kiss Demon passionately. The whole time his eyes were fixed on her, and their expression was cold.

Angel felt a rush of anger. [Bastard!] He was deliberately throwing his love for Demon in her face.

[[See? That proves that Gideon will never love you, not like I do.]] Angel backed against the tree as she heard Lucas' familiar drawl. She listened intently as he continued, Gideon and Demon for the moment forgotten. *[[And you have to be honest with yourself. The only reason you want him is because he reminds you of me, the one you really want. Forget him.]]*

Angel closed her eyes as his words sank in. He was right. When she opened her eyes, there was a determined expression on her face.

[[You're right, Lucas. I don't love him--]] She paused as she pushed herself back around to where she could see the terrace. Gideon was still there, holding Demon, but he was no longer looking in her direction. [Obviously, he thinks I've gone.] In that instant, she made up her mind. She smiled and turned her thoughts back to Lucas. *[[I'll do it, Lucas.]]*

From inside the Box Lucas sighed. He knew what she meant, but he wanted to have her actually say it. *[[Do what, Angel-face?]]*

[[The spell, Lucas. I want to bring you back.]]

[[You sure now, darlin'?]] Angel heard the uncertainty in his voice, and cursed herself for having waited so long to decide. She should have told him after the dream.

[[Yes, Lucas. Surer than I've been about anything in my life,]] she said with conviction.

When Lucas spoke, his tone was assertive. *[[Then let's get to your workshop darlin', and on the way I'll explain to you what's needed.]]*

[[Yes, Lucas,]] she agreed as she walked out from under the tree. She looked up one last time at the two people on the terrace. Then, lifting her head in defiance and thinking that Gideon could go to hell, she turned and walked away.

Lily, John, and Luke left the castle about an hour after noon. They'd had a heavy breakfast, so they'd decided on a late lunch. John and Luke were both wearing light pants, John with a tight-fitting red t-shirt and Luke with a light blue shirt. They carried the backpacks as Lily led them away from the castle and along a footpath into a nearby grove. After a while, the ground started to rise, and after about five minutes they came out of the trees and found that they were walking up the side of a high hill. When they arrived on its top a few minutes later, they discovered it was roughly round, higher than any of the neighboring hills, and it gave them a great view of the surrounding landscape. They put their backpacks on the ground and looked around.

"Beautiful," John exclaimed, his eyes roaming the distance.

Luke just stood there, overwhelmed at how much this view reminded him of his home on Earth. He'd only moved to Deneb IV with his family when he was in his early teens, and despite the Earth-like environment on Deneb IV, in his heart he still thought of Earth as home... a home that might soon be destroyed if they didn't find a cure for the plague.

John felt the sudden surge of Luke's emotions and turned around to look at him, his eyes mirroring the pain Luke felt. The young telepath had grown up on Earth, too. John reached out and gave Luke's shoulder a quick reassuring squeeze. Luke nodded his thanks to him.

"What is it?" Lily asked softly, realizing something was going on, something that had been triggered by the view, but unable to tell exactly what.

Luke turned to her, a sad smile on his lips. "This place reminds me of my hometown on Earth. It was built at the foot of a hill very much like this one, only more oval in shape, with a lone church tower on its peak. From up there, you could see for miles if the weather was clear. When I was a boy I used to spend most of my free time up there, looking out to the horizon or just lying on the grass and thinking. There was no place where I felt safer or more at ease. Even when I was caught in the middle of a thunderstorm one summer day, I wasn't afraid. I just stood there in the rain and wind, and when it was over, I let the sun dry my hair and clothes." He paused and looked out across the hills and woods, toward the far horizon. "All that will be lost forever if we don't stop the plague."

Lily looked at him, tears rolling down her face, then hugged him fiercely. After a few seconds she looked up at him, her arms still wrapped tightly around his chest. "What you said sounded like me! I come up here as often as I can. Sometimes I feel like this is my home, not the castle. When I look out, it's like a yearning inside my heart, for something indescribable, and at the same time, I feel safe and

whole." She swallowed, then continued, "Angel and Demon remember where they come from, while Ila doesn't. Me, I know little bits, like pieces of a puzzle, but many are missing. I can't even remember my family name! But this place sometimes when I'm up here, there's the ghost of a memory at the edge of my consciousness, just out of my reach."

She looked to the side, out across the rolling hills, trying to form the blurred images into words. "There's a hill, and I stand on top of it, feeling the wind carry my long hair with it. I'm a child, and I'm here with my parents, and..." She knitted her eyebrows for a moment, the look in her eyes growing more distant, then continued in a murmur, "There are other people around me. It's a celebration, but I don't know of what. Many women. Masks. Music. Drums. Chanting. Dance." She shuddered and stepped back, shaking her head, eyes closed. When she opened them again, she looked first at John, then at Luke and asked, "What did I say?"

The two men exchanged a glance, then Luke repeated what she had said. She listened to him intently, her eyes narrowed with concentration. When he'd finished, she nodded. "Sometimes I remember something and talk about it, and when my sisters hear it they tell me, since I can't remember myself. It's almost as if there were two separate people inside of me."

Suddenly, she whirled around in a circle, her arms flying, her silk dress, which had many buttons on the skirt so she could drape and gather it as she pleased, floated around her, revealing the fine leather boots she wore. "OK, enough brooding," she said when she had stopped. "I wanted to show you my favorite places, and this is one of them. Now I'm hungry, so I want to eat!" She paused a heartbeat, then put her hands on her hips and added in a commanding tone, "What are you waiting for? Get the food out!" The sparkle of mischief in her eyes was unmistakable.

John bowed and said, "Yes, mistress," trying hard to suppress his grin.

Lily looked at Luke, eyebrow arched, and he hurried to copy John's bow, murmuring an affirmative and not faring much better than John at trying to stay earnest. Then he got the blanket out of his backpack and spread it on the grass, while John unpacked the food. Soon everything was ready, and John reached out his hand to help 'Mistress Lily' sit down on the blanket. She accepted it with a gracious nod. As soon as she sat, a very unladylike grin spread on her face. "Not bad. I think you could be trained to be useful."

Luke laughed as John gave her a 'shocked' look and then grinned. "You're lucky you're pregnant, or I'd give you a spanking!"

She giggled, unimpressed, while John sat down to her right and Luke to her left. They wouldn't let her take anything herself, but served her what she wanted. She laughed, "You'll spoil me hopelessly! I have to warn you, I could get used to this very easily!"

"Nothing is too good for the mother of our children," John said, handing her the plate he had just filled again for her. He looked at her sincerely, and Lily couldn't help the tears that were coming to her eyes. The plate almost fell from her trembling hand before she could set it down on the blanket.

Luke smoothed back a strand of her red locks that had been blowing in the wind and softly said, "Hey..."

Lily sighed, wiping the tears off, then laughed. "I've always been way too romantic and emotional!"

Both men smiled at her, and Raven leaned forward to plant a kiss on her cheek, and then said, "Don't

you dare to change the least bit. We love our Fire Lily the way she is."

Lily drew both of them into a tight embrace, crying freely as the joy in her heart [And the hormones?] overwhelmed her. She lay back, pulling her two lovers down, green eyes glowing not only because of her tears, as she whispered, "Light my fire."

Gideon got Deborah back into her rooms as fast as he could after he saw Angel. He didn't want to risk any chance of Deborah seeing her sister for a while. She looked better than she had in the morning, but the dark shadows still showed under her eyes and he wanted her to sleep. The passionate kiss he'd given her on the terrace had aroused her, however, and when he led her back to her bedroom she had only one thing on her mind. It didn't take long for it to be the only thing on his mind, too. Gideon made love to her slowly, caressing, touching, stroking every part of her body, pleasuring her, finding new ways to bring her to climax, then keeping her there, letting waves of ecstasy flow through and over her, until finally he allowed himself to come with her, releasing in a flood of heat deep inside her. They lay in her bed afterwards, both covered in a fine sheen of sweat, Deborah's head resting on his shoulder. He felt her drift into sleep and carefully moved her until her head was on the pillow and he could slide out of the bed without disturbing her.

He stood, watching her sleep for a moment, entranced by the softness of her expression and the beauty of her body. Gideon looked fondly down at where Deborah's stomach swelled, then lifted a sheet from the floor where it had fallen and covered her with it. Closing the bathroom door behind him so the noise wouldn't disturb her, he showered quickly. He returned to her bedroom to find her still deeply asleep. Grabbing clean clothes, Gideon moved into the living room where he dressed, and left the door slightly ajar so he could hear her if she called for him. Picking up his book from the table where he'd left it, he sat in one of the white sofas and settled down to a quiet afternoon of reading.

John and Luke packed up the remainders of their picnic, then followed Lily down the hill and into the grove again. She had shown them a particularly high tree that stood at the edge of a small clearing, and had told them that it was their next destination. Something had seemed odd about it, besides its unusual height and form, but neither Luke nor John could figure it out, and Lily only smiled when they asked. "You'll see when we get there."

It didn't take long for them to get to the clearing. They entered it opposite that special tree. Its branches started only above the other treetops, with foliage that wasn't very thick, or more to the point, much thinner than on the other trees in the grove. It seemed to be an altogether different species, almost like a tropical tree in an oak forest. Lily stopped to give the two men time to look at it, watching their faces for any reactions.

Luke frowned -- he could see things hanging in the tree's branches. [Those can't be fruit, but what--] Suddenly, one of the things moved, and changed from one branch to another with a few flaps of its wings.

"Bats!" John exclaimed.

Lily grinned. "You're right! They look almost like fruit bats -- flying foxes -- on Earth, and only live on this tree. Come on, let's go nearer! I want to introduce you to someone."

They followed her until they were almost under the branches of the bats' home tree. Lily asked them to stay back a bit, then opened a satchel she had fastened to one of the buttons on her skirt and took out a grape-like fruit, holding it in her left palm while she stretched out her right arm. She let out a loud, high whistle, waited a few seconds, and then let out another one. At first nothing happened, then John showed Luke a dark form gliding down toward them. It fluttered when it came near Lily, turning upside down as it grabbed Lily's arm with its claws, an incredibly agile maneuver. It immediately swallowed the grape off Lily's hand. It looked like a small flying fox, but was almost a foot long.

"Hello, darling. I know it's been a long time since you've seen me." Lily purred and laid the bat against her chest like a baby, its head with the tiny black eyes peeking over her shoulder at the two strangers. When Lily turned and walked up to them, it continued watching them. "This is Devi. Devi, meet my friends, Luke and John."

Devi was sniffing and wrinkling her nose as Lily stopped in front of Luke, who was charmed by the small mammal's sweet face that was responsible for the species' name. Devi held tight to Lily's dress and her arms with her claws, but suddenly she reached out with her right front claw and grabbed Luke's arm, then her foot claw followed, and she transferred to him. He flinched at first, but then carefully closed his arms around the fragile-looking body, and finally smiled when she sniffed at his chin.

Lily giggled. "Good. She likes you."

John reached out and stroked the soft fur that covered part of the bat's body. "How did you manage to tame it?"

"Oh, I didn't. I found her in the castle's orchard one morning with a broken wing. I don't know what happened, but I managed to calm her so I could take her inside to heal it and feed her. She stayed with me for a few days, sleeping under my bed's canopy, but then she finally felt the call of the wild again and left. Whenever I come here and whistle, she'll visit me." Lily stroked Devi between her ears, a contented smile on her face, and then she looked at John. "Do you want to hold her too?"

"Yeah, sure."

Lily softly nudged Devi, and she let go of Luke and let herself be transferred to John, who smiled down at her. "Hello, young lady."

Luke chuckled. "I was just thinking that this is good practice for us. We should come here more often."

Demon awoke in mid-afternoon, feeling rested and calmer from her sleep. She was disappointed to find that she was alone, but smiled when she remembered their lovemaking before she'd slept. [Give the poor man a break; he needs some rest, too.] She became aware of a soft droning sound coming from the living room, and slipping quietly out of bed, looked through the doorway to see Gideon fast asleep on the sofa. He was stretched out full-length with a pile of cushions behind his head. The book he'd been reading had fallen to the floor beside him.

She looked adoringly at him and wondered if she woke him with a kiss if he'd want to make love again. [Oh, let him sleep. Give him chance to recover,] Demon thought to herself as she gazed at him. Pulling the door almost closed, she crept quietly into the bathroom, then showered and dressed. When she returned to the living room, she could see that Gideon was still fast asleep. [Perfect.]

Demon slipped through the outer door and headed straight for Angel's rooms. As she walked through the corridors she wondered what the best approach would be. It would be so easy for them to wind each other up into a massive row, and she didn't want that. She wanted to find out what had made Angel act so cruelly the night before. It was so out of character for her sister. Angel could be thoughtless, but she was never malicious. That comment had been designed to cause as much hurt as she could. What had driven her to it? Demon approached Angel's room with some trepidation.

When she arrived at Angel's outer door, she pressed down on the handle and it swung open. She moved into Angel's living area and suppressed her usual burst of irritation at the mess. She called out her sister's name and waited for a moment, wishing she could sense if Angel were present. Getting no response, Demon walked on through to the bedroom, called again and waited. After a few moments, she decided that Angel must be elsewhere and turned to leave, but then a waft of cool air hit her back and she turned to see Angel emerging from her workshop.

Demon watched her carefully, trying to see why Angel looked different, then she realized that Angel was not dressed in her usual red, but was totally in black. The sleeveless tunic and skintight pants were both black leather, totally unlike anything Demon had ever seen Angel wear before.

Angel stared at Demon, her pale blue eyes cold as ice. "What do you want?" Her voice had no more warmth than her eyes. Demon was taken aback. Again, this was out of character, Angel always projected warmth, sometimes more than was comfortable, but she was never cold.

"I wanted to talk to you about last night. I want to try to work out a way for you and Matthew to stop fighting." Demon sounded wary, even to herself.

Angel moved over to her love seat and sat, leaning back and looking up at Demon through narrowed eyes.

"What about last night? It was true, wasn't it? Lucas fucked you when he was here. The baby could easily be his." Her voice was a flat monotone, cutting Demon as much by the tone as the content of her comment.

Demon kept her voice low and controlled when she spoke, but felt her temper flaring at the deliberate cruelty of Angel's comment. "I know it's true. I just try to forget it. I feel ill when I remember what happened with him. The thought of him being the father of my child is sickening. I have sleepless nights about it. You didn't need to remind me. Why did you? What did you hope to achieve?"

Angel smiled lazily up at her, shifting her legs so she curled up comfortably. "I wanted to hurt you, and I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to show you how it feels when someone who you thought loved you just tramples on your feelings and couldn't give a damn how much it hurts. That's what the two of you have been doing to me since Gideon arrived. It's horrible, isn't it?"

Demon was left speechless for a moment, trying to think if there was any justification for Angel's comment. Had she and Gideon been inconsiderate? Had they rubbed her nose in their feelings for each other? Demon didn't think they had.

"Yes, it's horrible, and I'm sorry if that's how we've made you feel, but if we did, it wasn't deliberate." Demon hoped that taking a conciliatory line might open Angel up to a more reasonable discussion.

Angel laughed contemptuously. "Is that supposed to make it better? And do you know how you can get

Captain Giddy-up and me to stop fighting? You can do two things, Demon. First you can tell him to get out of my home and stay out. If you don't want to do that, you can tell him to keep his dick in his pants and stop trying to stick it in me." Angel leaned forward and grinned maliciously at her sister.

Demon lost the last shreds of her temper, and couldn't help but retaliate. "You seemed to want him anywhere you could get him on his last visit. What's your problem? Finding him a little more resistant on this trip?"

Angel laughed again. "Resistant? He couldn't get it into me fast enough yesterday in the orchard, and why don't you ask him about the library sometime? That'll make a nice bedtime story for you." She rose from the seat and pushed past Demon, heading back into her workshop.

Demon grabbed her arm as she passed. "Why are you doing this, Angel? Why are you lying to hurt me?" Angel stared down at Demon's hand, squeezing her upper arm.

"I wouldn't dream of lying to you, sister dear. Check out the facts with your beloved and see what he has to say. Tell him that I'm still not sure if I'm pregnant and see how he reacts." Angel looked defiantly into Demon's eyes.

Demon slowly released her grasp of Angel's arm while she spoke. "One of these days you're going to push things too far, Angel. There are some things even I won't forgive you. I have limits, and you are damned close to finding them right now."

Angel sneered up at her sister. "Am I supposed to care? Leave me alone, Demon. I don't need your forgiveness. Go back to your Captain and forgive him." She swept across the room, waving her arm at the side of the fireplace. The concealed door rippled open and shut behind her, leaving Demon standing alone in the middle of the bedroom.

Demon was so angry that all her previous concern and sympathy for Angel drained away. [If that's how she wants it, fine. I couldn't care less.] She strode out of the room, with no thought other than to put as much space as she could between herself and her sister.

On her way back to her room, she thought about the lies Angel had told about Gideon. Demon knew he would never betray her like that. How could Angel even think that she would believe such a stupid lie? Her mood lightened as she thought about it, and by the time she reached her room she was almost laughing at the ridiculousness of it. She slipped quietly through the outer door, only to find Matthew still fast asleep. She knelt by the side of the sofa and kissed him, softly at first, but as his mouth opened under hers, with increasing passion. Demon felt his arms move around her, and he pulled her close. His hands moved to the buttons at the back of her dress and she could feel him undoing them one by one as the kiss continued and deepened. Within moments she was on her back, naked, on the floor, with Matthew above and inside her, exactly where she wanted him to be.

Angel stood in the middle of her workshop taking deep breaths to calm herself. She'd just finished listening to Lucas tell her what was needed for the spell, when she'd heard Demon calling her. Immediately, she was irritated at being interrupted in the middle of something that would bring Lucas back to her. A cold rage had crept over her and it was that which had pushed her to go and find out what her sister wanted.

Angel let out a breath as her words to Demon echoed in her head, and suddenly a wave of guilt washed

over her. She'd said things, terrible things, and if she hadn't said those things herself, she would never have believed she could be so cruel.

Angel frowned, trying to understand what had made her say those things. She'd regretted the crack that she'd made about Lucas and the baby, yet instead of apologizing, the anger she felt had made her strike out. It was as if she were no longer in control of her own words.

"Dear God, how could I do that to her?" asked Angel of herself. Why had she been deliberately malicious to Demon? Why had she been so angry with her? What had made her suddenly want to hurt her sister like that? She felt on the border of panic and was about to turn around and leave, to go after Demon to apologize, when she heard Lucas's voice.

[[Why should you apologize to her, darlin'? Everything you said was the truth.]]

[[Lucas, I shouldn't have. I may be angry with Gideon, but I don't hate Demon. Why did I say those things, Lucas?]] asked Angel anxiously.

He was silent, thinking. He had to make sure she didn't go after her sister. He'd projected the Rage into her, so she would be hostile to Demon. He couldn't have Whiplash getting to Angel, maybe turning her around, so that she'd decide against bringing him back. Highly unlikely, but he wasn't going to take the risk. Angel may be his, but that damned connection with her sisters was strong. He had to influence her emotions, knowing that all the hurt Angel felt would come out directed at Demon, pushing a wedge between them.

[[Angel, darlin': Don't you know that all Demon cares about is her Captain? Nothing you said was a lie. She never stopped to consider your feelings. She just carried on with him without a thought for you. How much of her have you seen since he arrived? What took her so long to come and see you? If she really cared, then she would have come sooner.]]

Angel stood, chewing over what Lucas was telling her. After several moments, she spoke softly, a cold look in her eyes.

[[You're right, Lucas.]] She paused a moment longer, pushing her encounter with Demon out of her mind. It was no longer important. The only thing that mattered now was Lucas.

When they left Devi and her big family it was already late afternoon. Lily led them farther along the path until it emerged from the woods, ending near a small pool, which was half surrounded by trees and half open to the sun.

Lily stood near its edge, taking off her dress, then stepped into the water. She couldn't help but smile as she felt the two men's eyes roam over her back. When she was in up to her hips, she turned around and asked, "Are you afraid of water? Come in, it's wonderful!" Then she threw herself backwards and swam on her back, feeling light and free, since the water carried her weight as well as that of the twins inside her.

John dove into the water and surfaced beside her, smiling. "It's been a long time since I went swimming. There's not enough water on the Excalibur."

"Well, you can come here anytime you want, Sweet Face," Lily said with a smile.

"I think I'll take you up on that offer," he said, then crawled toward the far end of the pool.

Luke had meanwhile stepped into the pool and was swimming toward Lily slowly, taking in the surrounding scenery. He smiled at her when he started treading water in front of her. "You have good taste, judging from your favorite places."

Lily laughed lightly and said, eyes sparkling, "Well I'm glad they meet with your approval, sir." She splashed him and was out of his reach before he could react, swimming toward the waterfall.

Lily lifted herself up onto a flat stone that extended out from under the waterfall -- backwards, since her belly was already too big to do otherwise. She stepped under the light spray and let the water drum softly onto her skin, like tiny fingers massaging it gently. She smoothed her hair back, feeling at one with her surroundings.

Luke was still treading water where Lily had left him, watching her stand under the waterfall, bathed in shades of yellow, gold, orange, and red from the sun, which was sinking slowly toward the horizon. She reminded him of faerie or elfin women in the picture books he'd had as a child. Luke took in her petite form, still delicate and graceful despite her swollen belly, her wet hair hanging almost to her knees, and thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. As always when he looked at her, he was utterly captivated; she simply took his breath away. For the first time, he really understood the line from Romeo and Juliet, ['Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight! / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.']

Lily almost jumped when a pair of arms closed around her from behind, hands gently touching her belly. Even though the waterfall was small and didn't carry much water, she hadn't heard anything through the sound of the falling liquid.

"Did you know you get more beautiful with every day of your pregnancy?" Luke's voice said into her ear.

Lily smiled and turned her head slightly to look at him -- he wasn't much taller than her now since he stood on a lower stone -- reaching up and caressing his cheek. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Sad Eyes."

"Oh, I have you in my sights, all right," Luke murmured in between kissing the nape of her neck. She could feel his rigid shaft as she leaned back against him, her hand sliding down. His left hand wandered to her breast, the caresses he lavished upon it making her moan and close her eyes, while his right hand remained on her belly, softly rubbing it.

Water splashed her feet, and when she looked she saw John emerge from the water, sit down on his heels before her and look up at her lovingly through the spray. He touched her feet and slowly ran his hands up the outside of her legs, resting them on her hips. All the while his eyes held hers, and now he gave her a smile -- tender, promising, passionate, and he bent forward, placing a soft kiss on her belly. Then, sinking lower, he touched her wet folds with his lips, parting them with his tongue, enjoying her gasp when it touched her clitoris for the first time. He sucked gently, savoring the taste of her. After a short while, he felt Lily shift her hips as Luke entered her from behind, then she started moving in the rhythm of his thrusts. John never let go, following her hips' swaying motions, sucking harder now. He could feel Lily's hands close around the back of his head and press his face against her clit, urging him on.

Lily was on the verge of climax, and she desperately grabbed John's hair and pressed his face against her, feeling him suck harder. A moment later she came violently, taking Luke with her, but John wouldn't let go, making her climax again and again, milking every last drop out of Luke's cock.

John finally leaned back and looked up at her, smiling into Lily's ecstatic eyes. Her hands let go of his hair, and she and Luke sank down in a heap beside John, breathing heavily. John tried to ignore his throbbing cock, knowing his lovers needed some rest, and looked off to the side to distract himself, at the lake and the surrounding trees.

Suddenly he felt a soft touch on his cheek and turned to see Lily sit, propped up on her hand. She pressed her lips against his, then bent down, supporting her weight with her elbows and lower arms, and took the head of his aching shaft into her mouth. She heard John's sharp intake of breath, and his ragged breathing when she moved her lips down the side of his cock, then up the other side, enjoying his soft moans.

Luke felt Lily move and slowly opened his eyes. He was still panting slightly, not yet fully recovered - but what he saw quickened his pulse again. Lily bent down and took John's shaft into her mouth, her face hidden beneath a veil of hair, but Luke could see John's ecstatic face as he drew in his breath, and that was enough to make his cock stir again. While Lily continued to stimulate John with her mouth, Luke took things in his own hand.

Lily took him in farther than before, stimulating John with her lips and tongue while slowly letting her head sink lower, careful not to trigger her gag reflex. She had never tried this before, had never trusted a man enough to try it, but when she'd seen John's erection, the temptation had been too great to resist. She could feel him grow harder inside her mouth, immediately followed by her own body's reaction -- pure unadulterated lust. She closed her eyes, head spinning.

John's eyes were closed; he was unable to do anything but let Lily drive him crazy with the way she used her lips and tongue on him. Her caresses grew faster, harder, her teeth lightly scratching the sensitive skin, mercilessly driving him toward release.

Luke's strokes grew faster as he watched Lily pleasuring John with her mouth, knowing by the look on the other man's face that he was as close to orgasm as himself.

Lily knew that John wouldn't be able to hold back much longer. She was amazed to discover how aroused she became while she was doing this to him. Something about having total control of him, hearing his gasps and moans as he was at her mercy, turned her on in a way she'd never known, made her juices flow. She took him into her as far as possible, then drew back fast, her teeth scraping along his rigid shaft, milking his essence into her mouth as he came with a loud cry.

Luke felt himself explode when he witnessed John's orgasm and heard Lily's answering moan as her body shuddered.

Lily's eyes flew wide open when she felt her vagina contract and spasm moments after she'd felt John's hot come fill her mouth. A low animal moan rose from her throat before she collapsed on her side.

John heard a loud cry and realized that it was his own as a violent orgasm ripped through him. Lily uttered a moan that sounded only partially human...

For a few seconds she just laid there, her head on John's thigh, panting heavily. Lily coughed slightly and felt John's hand caress her hair as he asked, also panting, "Are you all right?"

Lily swallowed and nodded. She could still taste him in her mouth, something strange and new. "Just not used to this." Suddenly she remembered Luke, and lifted her head to look back over her shoulder. He was lying on his back where she had left him, eyes closed, legs and arms sprawled, but she smiled when she saw come spilled all over the place. "Enjoy yourself, Sad Eyes?"

Luke's head rolled to the side and he looked at her, smiling groggily. "Impossible not to around you." He crawled over to his lovers and cuddled up against Lily, cheek to cheek with her, wrapping his arm around her and resting his hand on John's thigh.

When he opened his eyes the next time [Did I sleep?], the sun had disappeared beyond the horizon, leaving dusk to rule for a short while. The air was still comfortably warm. He sat up and looked around.

Lily felt him stir and looked up, then sighed. "I guess we'd better get back to the castle, before dinner becomes breakfast..."

Several hours had passed since they'd descended the stairs. Max reviewed the material they had gathered from the cavernous underground room they'd found at the bottom. It was mostly empty, the floor peppered with holes where equipment had been removed. They had pried a number of signs off the walls and laid them out in a line in the center of the room. Ilas and Dureena watched expectantly as he walked slowly along the line on the floor, examining each sign in turn.

"What do they say, Max?" Ilas's voice held no doubt that he could tell her.

"Well, this one," he kicked one of the plaques on the floor, "says EXIT. That's not very helpful. These," he kicked three more, "are proper names. I guess they were names on office doors. But these," he stooped and gathered the remaining five signs, "are much more interesting. The writing is familiar. Not identical to any one I know, but similar. It almost looks like a version of Drakh."

Dureena strode forward and grabbed his arm, hissing, "What do they say, Max? And why would they use Drakh writing here?"

Max shook his head. "It isn't Drakh. It's just a bit like it. It might be a forerunner of that language. See this one?" He held up one of the plaques. "That symbol means 'room.' This one is an action of some kind, but it's a technical word. It might be related to water or liquid. It could mean something like 'Scrubbing Room,' but I need to check it out against my databank. Keep looking. I need more material if I'm going to crack the technical vocabulary."

More hours passed as they investigated side corridors and rooms. Max had insisted that they go back to the surface for a break and food in the early afternoon, but they had descended again quickly. He was beginning to despair of finding anything usable when he heard Dureena calling his name. Following the sound of her voice, he found her squatting in front of an opening in a wall, shining her flashlight into the hole she had made. Inside were sheets of plastic material, all of which were covered with diagrams and symbols. Max snatched a sheet from Dureena's hand and scanned it quickly. At first glance he could see that the symbols and diagrams represented some kind of chemical formulae. Words were scattered between the diagrams, but the language was entirely technical. He could recognize word roots, but knew that deciphering the detail was going to be lengthy task. The quantity of material, however, made his eventual success almost certain.

He hugged Dureena and kissed her hard. "Perfect! Just what I need." He heard Ilas enter the room behind him and turned. "Let's get all of this back to camp, then we need to get moving. I told Matheson that we'd have the bikes back to the castle today and Gideon will skin me alive if we don't."

Ilas pouted. "Demon won't let him. She says that killing is wrong."

Max picked up an armful of the plastic sheets. "Well, on this occasion Demon is right, but you don't always have to take her word as law, you know. Now let's move."

The sun had set as they packed away their campsite and the material they had gathered. It was full dark by the time they took off. Max told himself that they'd be back at the castle before mid-night, which was technically still today, so he'd kept his promise.

He sat behind Ilas, fully confident in her ability to fly the bike, which gave him the opportunity to think long and hard about what they'd gathered at the ruins. Eilerson had some strong suspicions about what they'd found, but wasn't willing to share them until he'd done a lot more checking. Unfortunately, the data he really needed was only available from the medical databanks on the Excalibur. He decided to keep his initial report vague, and to ask Ilas and Dureena to play down the importance of their finds. He'd just report his success at translating the inscribed signs at this stage. His work on the plastic sheets could wait until he returned to the Excalibur, when he would be able to verify his suspicions.

Max relaxed and decided that for the rest of his stay he would be on vacation. To hell with work.

Matheson, Raven, and Gideon sat in the lounging pit in Lily's room, drinking the excellent local wine, talking, while their women had disappeared into Lily's bathroom. Matheson was looking quizzically at the bathroom door.

"What do women do in there? I mean, why is it that women always go to the bathroom together? Men don't do that." He looked round at Gideon and Raven to see if either of them had an answer.

Gideon snorted with laughter. "They talk. Probably about us. Have you ever listened to a group of women talking when they think there are no men around? They tell each other things that would make your hair stand on end, and use language that would make a Gropo blush."

Matheson's eyes widened. "What sort of things?"

Raven was grinning now and leaning forward, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. "Well, if the nurses I've worked with are anything to go by, then size, shape, application, frequency, and staying power are the most popular topics."

Matheson looked from one to the other, trying to work out whether they were serious. "You're joking. They don't -- they couldn't -- surely not."

Gideon matched Raven's position and tone. "If they come out of there laughing, you can be certain that one of them has told the other something that we'd much rather they hadn't. We won't find out what

it is for days and then suddenly, out of nowhere, they'll drop a comment into conversation which makes you realize that you've been discussed, compared, contrasted and usually been found wanting. If it hasn't happened to you yet, John, be prepared." He sat back in his seat and grinned at Raven, who returned the smile and spoke.

"Talking of laughing, Captain, Demon looks much better this evening. You obviously did a good job in getting her to rest today."

Gideon laughed again. "Yeah, damn close to Rest in Peace. She is the *worst* patient I've ever known. Patient she's not. She wouldn't stay still for more than five minutes at a time, got bored with everything, and snapped every time I tried to distract her. By early afternoon I was ready to strangle her. The trouble is, I know what's bothering her and I can't see an answer, unless you know different, Doc?"

Raven raised an eyebrow and waited for Gideon to continue. He lowered his voice again. "It's what Angel said last night. She's brooding on it and doesn't seem able to move past it. I could swing for Angel -- well, let's leave that. If there were anyway that we could reassure her that I'm the one responsible for her child, it would help a lot. The problem is, the timing is so damned close. It can't be more than about four hours between the last time she and I -- and when Lucas Buck took over and -- well, you know what happened then. If we could just pinpoint the time of conception to the last two days that we spent here, that would do it. Any chance?" He looked hopefully at Raven.

Raven shook his head, while Matheson looked on sympathetically. "Not really. I know what you must be going through. Lily was in a similar state. She was worried sick that one or both of her babies might have been fathered by Lucas, but that was easy to tell. We did a genetic analysis this morning and eliminated any possibility of them being his. John and I now know that he's going to be the father of a boy, while I get a little girl."

Gideon looked startled. "Congratulations. One each? I didn't think that was possible."

Raven smiled at him again. "Damned unlikely, but possible, and the gene tests prove it. Your situation is different, though. Genetically, the child is yours, Matt. Isn't that enough?"

Gideon shrugged. "It is for me, but not for her. She's worried that if Lucas were in control when the baby was conceived, that some element of his 'spirit', whatever that might be, could have become part of the baby. I don't believe that's possible, but she does and that's what matters. There's no way to prove it one way or another unless we could fix the time to those last two days, when we *know* that he was gone."

Raven looked apologetic. "I'm sorry Captain, even with the equipment they have here, it's just not possible to be that precise. I wish I could help."

Before Gideon could respond, they all turned at the sound of the bathroom door opening and the laughter that emerged as Demon and Lily entered the room. Gideon looked over at Matheson and shook his head, speaking softly. "Hear that? At least one of us is in trouble."

The women walked over to the pit and joined the men sitting there. Demon sat next to Gideon then leaned against him, tucking her feet up under her on the seat. He reached his arm around her to draw her closer.

Lily pushed her way between her lovers, wiggling her hips until they moved enough to allow her space.

Both men then leaned toward her, Raven putting his arm around her, while Matheson took her hand in his. He kissed it gently, then spoke, "So what's so funny? What were the two of you laughing about?"

Gideon shook his head ruefully. [Brave man.] Lily turned and whispered into Matheson's ear. As she whispered, he looked straight across at Gideon, smiled, then started to blush. As he got redder in the face, Gideon turned to Demon. "What have you been saying about me, then?"

Demon snuggled closer to him and smiled. "About you? Nothing. We were just talking about vegetables."

Gideon frowned at her. "Vegetables?"

"Mmm, we were discussing the differences between carrots and cucumbers."

Angel gathered all the ingredients that Lucas told her she would need. She was a little surprised that all that was required were the four different herbs and powders that she had in her arms. She walked over to her workbench and placed them down beside the mixing bowl and eyed the bottles warily.

[[Lucas, are you sure this is all I need?]] She asked uncertainly.

[[It's just the beginnin',]] drawled Lucas's deep voice that only she could hear.

Angel cocked her head to one side. Lucas had told her that she could bring him back, without having to use a host, but she was doubtful. How was it possible? He'd told her that it would be easy, but she couldn't see how. To bring someone back like this needed powerful magic. She didn't think she had the ability. Besides, how could something as complicated as this be so easy to execute?

[[It'll be that easy Angel-face. Now mix the ingredients in the order I told you.]] Angel jumped slightly; it never ceased to surprise her that he was able to read her thoughts like that.

[[Do it now, Angel,]] ordered Lucas softly.

Angel moved forward, and picked up the bottle containing the first ingredient and pulled out the cork, then she picked up her measuring spoon. Lucas told her the amount required. She measured it out and then emptied it into the bowl. She repeated the process in order with the two herbs and last remaining powder. When all of the ingredients were in the bowl, she mixed them together. She cringed at the pungent smell they released when combined.

[[God, Lucas, this stinks,]] said Angel with disgust as she backed away from the stench.

Lucas gave a low chuckle. *[[Well then, don't breathe it in, darlin'.]]* Angel wrinkled her nose at him and snorted. That was easy for him to say. She needed to breathe and he didn't. He was safe in her head and couldn't smell anything.

Angel eyed the bowl with disgust. *[[What now?]]* She ignored the impatience she felt at Lucas telling her step-by-step what he wanted her to do. It would save time if he just explained everything at once so she wouldn't have to keep stopping to ask what came next. She suspected that he didn't trust her to carry out his instructions properly.

[[Put the mixture in something that can be carried. You're gonna need it for the spell ritual.]]

Angel leaned across the workbench and picked up a clean empty bottle, then started spooning the mixture into it. When done, she corked the bottle and placed it back on the table. At least with it safely in the bottle she couldn't smell it. Angel took a deep breath and pursed her lips. There was still a lingering stench in the air. *[God, I hope that disappears quickly.]* Realizing she hadn't let Lucas know she was finished, she turned her thoughts back to him, informing him quickly that she was done.

[[Good. Now write this down, and make sure you get the words right, Angel-face,]] he warned. He didn't want any mistake on her part. The wrong wording and he could remain in oblivion forever. Angel nodded and quickly picked up a blank sheet of paper and a pen. She bent down to write as Lucas dictated the spell to her. When he was finished, she straightened up and looked at what was written.

[[Read it back to me,]] he ordered. She frowned, but didn't allow herself to think how much it annoyed her when he ordered her around. Actually, it didn't really matter to her that much, in fact it excited her how he always took charge. Besides, this spell would bring Lucas back to her; she would no longer be the only one without the man she loved, she thought bitterly. That's all that *really* mattered now.

Angel brought her attention back to the piece of paper in her hand and concentrated on the words. There was no need to say them out loud as she read them to Lucas:

[[From time long past I summon you forth, Lucas Buck. Body and Spirit combine, unto this time I bring you forward. As you were then, so shall you be.]] Angel paused and looked the words over again. Only then did she ask him nervously, *[[Did I get everything, Lucas?]]*

[[Perfect, darlin'.]] Angel smiled, pleased with herself. She folded the piece of paper and placed it beside the bottle, staring at them for a moment, a small frown creasing her brow.

[[What's next, Lucas?]] Lucas had yet to tell her how to carry out the spell.

[[Now we go to the Apocalypse Box.]] Angel froze. That would mean going to the cellars.

[[Lucas, we can't. If I'm seen going down there, especially by one of my sisters...]] her thoughts faltered.

[[Well then you'd better be careful.]] His tone brooked no argument from her. He felt her hesitation and continued. *[[For this to work Angel-face, we need the Apocalypse Box and some place where no one will interrupt you. Down below we get both.]]*

Angel brushed her hand across her forehead nervously. He was right. She sighed, then moved to the chair, picked up her carry-bag and moved back to the table where she picked up the bottle and paper and placed them gently inside. Obviously, he'd been expecting some kind of response from her, because when he spoke, she heard impatience in his voice.

[[You do want me back, don't you?]] His tone was dangerous.

Angel gasped and rushed to answer him. *[[Yes, Lucas. More than anything.]]* It was the truth; she wanted him back. She'd finally faced the truth that it wasn't Gideon she wanted and that he felt nothing for her. It hurt her more than anything, but now she knew who loved her and who she loved, and she'd do anything to bring him back. She didn't give a thought to how the others would react.

[[Well then, Angel-face, let's go.]] Angel smiled, excitement and nerves making her move quickly out of her workshop and out of her rooms.

As she walked down the corridor leading from her rooms, Angel suddenly realized that she would probably be gone for a while. If she didn't tell someone where she was, then her sisters might worry and wonder. She spent much of her time alone these days, without telling her sisters where she was and what she was doing, and they never came looking for her, but she decided this time it would probably be a good idea to let someone know where she was. She didn't think Demon would come looking for her, not after their fight, but then again, depending on whether she asked Gideon about what Angel had told her, she might. She couldn't risk that.

Angel smiled when she saw the Guard Captain ahead. *[Perfect.]* She was in no mood to speak directly with her sisters. *[Especially Demon.]* She would ask him to tell Demon that she was down in the village and that she didn't know when she'd be back. Angel called to him. He froze and watched her nervously as she walked toward him. She had always made him a little nervous; she always looked like she was going to pounce.

Angel didn't want to waste time, usually she enjoyed teasing him, making him more nervous, but she just told him to inform Demon of where she was going. When finished, she walked away without a backward glance and didn't see him heave a sigh of relief and walk away.

Angel made her way through the castle. She was mildly relieved that Lucas was silent and not telling her to make it snappy. She was too nervous already without him speaking to her and pushing her on. Besides, she had to keep her attention focused on what was in front of her, looking for any sign of someone who might see her. She quickened her pace and felt relieved when she finally reached the door that led to the cellars below the castle.

She concentrated, releasing the binding spell that held the door shut and using her powers to turn the lock. The door swung open. She slipped in quickly, letting her mind close it behind her as she took hold of a fire-torch and lit it with her fire-spell. She didn't hesitate as she moved further into the darkness, getting closer and closer with every step to that small cell buried in the deepest, darkest recesses of the castle.

[{Chapter 1}](#) [{Chapter 2}](#) {Chapter 3}

The Witches of Eriadne: Toil and Trouble

[{Part 1: Anticipation}](#) [{Part 2: Reunion}](#) [{Part 3: Out and About}](#) {Part 4: Life and Death} {Part 5: Breaking Away}