

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude One - Part 2: Wakeup Call

by The Space Witches



Dureena Nafeel, Max Eilerson and Ilas by Lilith

Chapter 1

Dureena slumped down in the chair Sarah Chambers had offered her -- and which she had refused -- when she'd entered the doctor's office in Medbay. But now she really needed to sit, because her legs were trembling. Her mind was racing, and so was her heart. She had suspected it, had hoped, but this wasn't really possible, was it? "Are you absolutely sure?" Dureena's yellow eyes studied her friend's face, which still showed her amazement.

"I tried every test in the book, and some that aren't in it, and triple checked every possibility of an error... And the result was always, positively, absolutely the same." She paused for a moment, then said, "But I don't understand how this is possible. I mean, you're the..." Sarah's voice faltered as she remembered her failure to save the Zanderi colonists on Theta 49, and she couldn't look at Dureena anymore.

The little Zanderi leaned forward and squeezed her hand. The memory of losing the last of her race still hurt, but she didn't want Sarah to feel guilty all of her life. "Stop blaming yourself. You did everything you could. Even you can't change fate."

Sarah smiled at her sadly, her eyes expressing how grateful she was for Dureena's understanding, then sighed and nodded, returning to the present riddle. "Well... do you have any idea how this was possible?"

A smile slowly spread on Dureena's lips. "I'm not sure... but I have a theory."

When Dureena walked out of Medbay she was virtually glowing, but too deep in thought to notice the curious looks of the people who saw her.

Max sat in his quarters, reading a report from his team about their last excavation on some backwater planet they'd visited recently, virtually buried in work, as he'd always been since they had left Eriadne. On the rare occasions when he looked into a mirror, even he had to admit that the unkempt, unshaved, haggard face that looked back at him was a shadow of his well groomed self of only a few weeks earlier. But each time that thought appeared he stashed it away in some safe dark corner of his mind, and buried himself in his work again, not allowing himself to think about anything else. But in his dreams he found himself back on Eriadne, or on the Excalibur with Ilas, talking, laughing, making love... only to wake up aroused and alone, cursing himself. [Why can't I just forget her? Yes we had some mind-blowing sex, but so what?] He'd finally cut down on his sleep hours, afraid of the recurring dreams and what they did to him. He didn't dare to think about Ilas, and that she was possibly pregnant with his child... though he couldn't fathom how she could have known so early. These memories were accompanied by longing and pain and he couldn't allow himself to feel that. He couldn't allow himself to feel anything.

He could tell that the Excalibur crew had noticed his withdrawal, and his quietness, but except for curious -- and, lo and behold, even concerned! -- looks, and Sarah's recommendation that he take some time off and eat more regularly, no one had dared comment on it, at least not in front of him. As soon as he turned his back they were probably gossiping away. But he didn't care. Just like he didn't care about anything else since his return.

Max took off his glasses and rubbed his sore eyes. The only one who'd really tried to break through his shell was Dureena. She'd tried to get closer, joining him at meals in the mess, managing to walk into him wherever he happened to be on the ship, trying to get him to come out of his quarters. Each time he'd politely told her that he had a lot of work, that he had to prepare their next dig, that he didn't have any time, that he was fine. She clearly didn't believe him, and kept trying, while he kept refusing her, hoping that she would give up soon. Once she'd caught him during a dig, standing well out of sight of the others, marveling at the sunset. It hadn't been nearly as colorful or spectacular as the ones on Eriadne, but still he'd felt a pang inside. When he'd turned around he'd found Dureena standing a short distance behind him, watching him with concern in her eyes. He'd mumbled something to the effect that he'd been thinking about some problem with the dig, then had left quickly, ignoring Dureena's concerned look.

Max sighed and put his glasses back on to continue reading the report, already mentally listing points for a lecture to his team during their meeting tomorrow, on how to effectively manage a dig. The things they'd found on Eriadne were sure to make him a fortune in bonuses from IPX, but he still had to work with a bunch of incompetents!

The door buzzer rang. Max looked up from the report, irritated, and glared at the door. "What?" he barked in a tone that would surely shoo off anyone outside.

"Max, it's Dureena," he heard the little Zanderi's voice say, "Let me in."

For a moment he sat there and pressed his lips together, then said, "I don't have time for a chat, sorry, I have a pile of reports to go through!"

Outside, Dureena was leaning against the doorframe with one hand, the other on her hip, taking a deep breath to get her temper under control and avoid shouting at him. She'd tried to get through to him again and again, but he'd brushed her off every time -- politely but firmly. None of his excuses or assurances had sounded the least bit convincing, and he knew it, but he still continued with them. [Well, Max, if this doesn't wake you up... then you died when we left Eriadne.]

"This isn't about you, Max... it's about me." [Mostly, at least.] "And I *will* come in, whether you open the door or not!"

Silence. Dureena held her breath, then finally Max said, "Open", and the door slid aside.

Max was sitting behind his desk, papers and artifacts piled on it, his glasses lying on a piece of paper in front of him. [He looks even worse than the last time I saw him!] Dureena thought as she walked towards his desk.

Before she could say anything, Max said sarcastically, "I would like to point out that I only opened the door because I didn't want you to get into trouble with the Captain for breaking into my quarters. Seems I've gone soft in my old age." He had to avert his eyes from Dureena's stare as she stood opposite him, and he motioned towards a chair. "So now you're here, take a seat, and let's get this over with." He put his glasses on again and continued reading.

Dureena looked at him for one more second, then pulled the chair towards her and sat down, leaning forward, her lower arms resting on the table-top, showing her cleavage very nicely. She could see his eyes flicker towards it for a moment and smiled inwardly. [Not dead yet, then.]

"Well?" Max asked, looking at her over the top of his glasses. "As I already told you several times I have a lot of work to do, so would you please tell me what this is about?" He swiveled his chair to the side, and just to do something, took a sip from the half-empty cup of cold coffee that had been standing on his table for hours.

"I'm pregnant."

Max choked, spewing coffee all over the pile of unread reports, while some of it somehow went up his nose and ran out of it as he was coughing out the rest that had gone down his windpipe. He quickly got out a handkerchief and, still coughing, cleaned off the reports, then blew his nose, which was burning like hell. "What?" he finally managed to croak in between coughs, staring at Dureena, who was grinning widely.

"I'm pregnant," she repeated, enjoying the sight of Max's jaw dropping.

"You're sure?" More coughing.

Dureena nodded. "Sarah just confirmed it."

Max swallowed, coughed a bit more, then asked, "But... but... how?"

Dureena's grin widened. "There's only one possibility. Ilas."

For a moment she could see the pain in Max' eyes as she mentioned the shapeshifter, but then his analytical brain kicked in, and after a few moments he frowned and said, "You mean... when Ilas, you and me..."

"She must have transformed herself *completely* into a Zanderi male, though how she managed to produce..." Dureena shook her head.

"Viable sperm," Max offered, and she nodded.

"Yes. That's beyond me. But apparently she did it. The proof is growing inside me. I'll have a baby, Max, and you and Ilas will be fathers!" Dureena was beaming now, clearly overjoyed with her new circumstance.

Max was too shocked to say anything more. He stood up, glasses in his hand, and chewing on their arm, he walked to the side of the room, turning his back on Dureena.

She looked at the back of his head, worried. "Max... what is it? Aren't you happy for me?" She got up and stepped around him, looking up into his face. "Max," she breathed, her voice slightly incredulous. Tears were silently running down his cheeks.

Finally he looked down at her. "Yes, I... I am happy for you, Dureena. Very much so." He gave her a sad smile. "Do you think... that Ilas... really is..."

"She was sure. Ilas is a shapeshifter, so she's bound to recognize any changes in her body immediately. Yes I do think she's pregnant."

Max sighed, closing his eyes for a moment, then started turning away from her. "I'm sorry... I..."

Dureena laid a hand on his arm to stop him. "Max -- you're missing Ilas at least as much as I miss her. But you can't bury yourself in work all the time. You have to let your feelings out, or they'll haunt you forever. If you carry on like this, they may just kill you. We feel the same feelings... so let's share them. I need you, Max... we need you."

Max turned back and looked down at the little Zanderi, seeing concern and care and... love... in her eyes. He sighed, realizing he couldn't go back to the routine he'd forced upon himself over the last weeks. Although the prospect of sharing his feelings with someone else was somewhat frightening, he somehow looked forward to it, and suddenly felt strangely light.

Dureena found herself being drawn into a bear hug, sighing happily as she snuggled up against Max's broad chest.

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