

# The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn - Part 4: Future

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The Witches' Guard Captain, Nikarran.

## Chapter 2

Lily hadn't remained on the bed for long. She'd only let Luke carry her to the infirmary for his sake, anyway. She'd really wanted--and would have been able--to walk by herself, but felt it was better to let him take care of her as long as she wasn't prone to being irritable and impatient. And she knew she'd walk around more--lots more--over the coming hours.

She was doing just that while discussing with Luke the available options depending on how well the first stage went, when John rushed into the side room they were in, barely noticing that the lights were dimmed slightly. "Are you all right?"

Lily smiled up at him as he reached her and took her hands in his, looking at her wide-eyed and panting. She had taken off her green velvet overdress, and was now only wearing a loose, comfortable off-white shift. She looked like a Goddess to John, with her flamboyant red hair framing her delicate features. "Of course, I am, Sweet-Face. It's only labor. I've been preparing for this every month since I

was twelve years old--with the exception of the last eight months, of course," she added with a wry grin.

John found himself grinning and shook his head, marveling at her calmness, but before he could say anything, Lily withdrew her hands from his and threw her arms around his neck, leaning forward and hanging onto him.

"Sorry. 'nother contraction." she murmured in between slow deep breaths, burying her face against his chest.

John held her gently, not even aware that he'd raised his shields at her touch, and he looked at Luke, who told him, "This may go on for quite some time," while gently massaging Lily's lower back. He frowned as he felt her trembling. "What is it, Lily? You're totally cramped."

"Hurts... so much." Lily breathed, her voice clearly labored.

Luke snatched the scanner from the nearby table, quickly set it up, then swept it over her middle. All readings indicated that labor was progressing normally. A second scan showed the same results. His frown turned into a scowl.

"What is it?" John asked, watching him with a worried expression on his face.

Luke shook his head. "At this early stage, the contractions shouldn't be very painful, but they obviously are for Lily. Yet the scanner tells me everything is as it should be. I can't believe it's not working properly. These instruments are practically maintenance-free and very long-lasting."

He set the scanner down on the table and crossed his arms, closely watching Lily as she gradually relaxed. Finally she leaned back from John, looking up at him and then at Luke with wide eyes. "Everything's OK now. No pain at all."

Luke continued to look at her for a few seconds, then grimaced. "I don't like this. I don't like this at all. I'll have to monitor you and the babies closely so I can intervene if there are any signs of something going wrong."

Lily looked straight up at him, her green eyes sparkling. "Everything will be all right, Luke. I know it will."

Luke sighed, wishing he had her confidence. What bothered him most was that apart from the extraordinary level of pain she was obviously feeling, there were no indications of any complications. "Well, we can only wait and see." He turned to John. "Did you prepare for this in any way?"

"While I was away," John said, realizing his voice was a bit shaky, "I did a lot of reading and watched every data crystal about labor and birth I could get my hands on. Not that I really saw a chance of actually being here at the birth, but I thought it couldn't hurt, anyway."

Lily looked from Luke to John, saying, "I'm glad I'm having my babies now. This way you're both here to welcome them into our family."

John felt a lump form in his throat as his feelings threatened to overwhelm him. To dissolve it, he asked, "Can I... can I do anything? Do you want me to get anything from your room?"

Lily smiled. "Thank you Sweet-Face, but that can wait. I guess I'll be here for quite some time, and Luke wanted to go check on Demon after you arrived."

Luke nodded. He didn't like the thought of leaving her, but he absolutely had to check on Demon, and at the moment, Lily did seem to be fine. He'd better hurry--[And pray that Demon doesn't need a cesarean,]--so he would be back before her next contraction started. "The earlier, the better. I'll be back as soon as possible. Let me know immediately if anything unusual occurs!" He looked from John to Lily, then brushed her forehead with his lips and hurried out.

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Gideon stood by the side of the bed in the room off the infirmary where they'd brought Deborah from the courtyard. The previous hour or so had been frantic. Alwyn had examined her and announced that she was indeed in second stage labor and that the baby's head had entered the birth canal. Luke had come in briefly to consult with Alwyn, and Gideon had been appalled to hear them discussing the possibility that they might have to operate on her. He was hugely relieved when they concluded that it wasn't necessary as the baby was still small enough to be born naturally. He'd helped get Deborah's dress off her, peeling it away from her breasts and belly where Lucas's blood had soaked through and stuck the material to her. Kirrin had arrived with a bowl of warm water and a sponge and he'd carefully washed away all the traces of blood. Kirrin had then left to carry out some instructions of Alwyn's that Gideon hadn't caught. No doubt he'd find out what they were later.

All through this time, Deborah had been having contractions, each lasting a minute or so with no more than three or four minutes between. Gideon cursed himself for not having done the reading on labor and delivery that he'd planned. He'd thought he still had plenty of time, so he was entirely unprepared for what was happening around him. He had no idea what he should be doing, so he just kept sponging the sweat from Deborah's face and body, and helped her to get into whatever position she felt most comfortable.

At the moment, her preferred position was kneeling upright on the bed with her arms wrapped around Gideon's neck as he stood beside it, with her leaning against him, and him carrying much of her weight. The only problem was that Deborah's weight was not inconsiderable and his knees were starting to buckle under the strain. He was just about to tell her that he needed a break when the next contraction hit her. Gideon braced himself as she buried her head in his shoulder and he heard a moan as the pain hit her. [Was that her or me?] At that point, he could hardly tell her to let go, so he jammed his trembling knees into the side of the bed and hoped they wouldn't give way before the contraction ended. When Deborah finally relaxed, he carefully lowered her onto her side and then he collapsed into a chair. [No one ever told me this could be painful for the father, too] he thought as he finally got his breath back.

He reached out and stroked her face. "How are you doing?"

The next thing Gideon knew, Deborah was on all fours on the bed, her reddened face centimeters from his, snarling, "It fucking hurts! How the hell do you think I'm doing? I am *never* doing this again, and for all I care right now, you can tie a fucking knot in it for the next fifty years!"

Gideon pulled back fast and suddenly felt as if he was in a small cage with a large, enraged wild cat. He somehow resisted the temptation to grab the chair he was sitting on and use it to fend Deborah off. To add insult to injury, he could hear Alwyn laughing from the end of the bed. "Quite right, my dear. You tell him, this is, after all, entirely his fault."

Gideon turned and glared at the Technomage. "You're a big help. Thanks a bunch." He turned back to Deborah, whose ferocity had subsided and was now sitting back on her heels with her legs spread wide. She was panting for breath but still glowering at him. He reached out slowly to push her hair back from her sweat-drenched face, half expecting to get his hand bitten, but was pleasantly surprised when she let him touch her, and then she even leaned into his hand as he caressed the side of her face.

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When Luke returned, Lily was relieved to hear that Demon didn't need a cesarean and her labor seemed to be progressing well. The tiny redhead was now sitting on a low chair, her legs spread wide, and leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, while John was massaging her shoulders. She purred and closed her eyes when he reached a hard spot on her left shoulder. "Oooh, yes."

John smiled and bent forward to place a light kiss on the top of her head, then straightened up again and continued massaging her. Suddenly, they all heard a soft grumbling sound, followed by one of Lily's soft, rippling laughs as she opened her eyes. "Oops, guess I had my last meal a tad too long ago..."

Both men were grinning now. "Should I get you something?" John asked, and she looked up at him, smiling, covering his hand on her shoulder with hers.

"Yes, please. I'd like something light, like a bowl of soup? And some herbal tea with honey, too, please. But the cook will still be sleeping."

John bowed his head. "No problem. Your wish is my command, Milady. I'll be back soon." He planted another kiss on the top of her head before leaving for the kitchen.

"Sweet-Face?" Lily called after him when he was just walking out the door.

He turned back around. "Yes, Milady?"

Lily smiled. "Make that three portions--you two must be getting hungry, too!"

John smiled back at her as he nodded, bowed his head slightly, and answered, "As you wish," then disappeared.

When the door had closed behind John, Lily cocked her head to the side and smiled at Luke. "I think a while ago the doctor said something about closely monitoring my babies and me?"

Luke couldn't help but grin at her, saying, "OUR babies," then picked up the scanner from the table again and squatted down before her. Suddenly the memory of another time he'd used it rushed in on him. What he'd had to do afterwards still haunted him.

Lily's hand on his cheek brought him back to the present. Startled, he looked up into her green eyes that were gazing at him full of warmth and compassion. "Unpleasant memories?" All Luke could do was give her a weak smile.

Lily looked at him, clearly as haunted by the memories as he was, then sighed and said

quietly, "We have to move the past aside so it won't throw its shadow over the present."

Luke gazed at her face thoughtfully for several seconds, contemplating what she'd said, then the hint of a smile touched his eyes. "I'll keep that in mind."

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John came back with a tray loaded with a pile of food: three bowls of steaming soup, a teapot with three matching cups, a pile of toast--crusts cut off, Luke was amused to notice--yogurt with honey, a jug of fruit juice, butter, marmalade and jelly, eggs, plates and cutlery, and everything else they needed for a decent breakfast.

Lily laughed as he started putting everything on a table. "Do you expect me to eat all of this?"

In the meantime, she'd had another very painful contraction, but again, Luke's scanner hadn't shown anything out of the ordinary. Lily had promised, if he let her move about freely in between contractions, to tell him the moment she felt something wasn't right. "Each labor is different, even for the same woman. So why can't this be my labor right now?" she had said. Without any data, he'd been unable to counter that.

"Eventually, yes," John said, answering her question and looking at her earnestly. "Depending on how long you're here, of course. It's important that you get some food, so you won't become exhausted."

Luke chuckled. "What am I here for, anyway? You're so well informed."

John gave him a wry grin. "Ask me again when the action really starts."

Lily walked over to the table and took one of the bowls into her hand to sniff at its contents. "Hmm. What is this? It smells delicious!"

John grinned. "John Matheson's special chicken soup. Or the local equivalent."

Lily looked at him, wide-eyed. "You made this? I hadn't realized you could cook."

"Yes, what other talents have you been hiding from us, John?" Luke added as he sat down at the table. He was determined to keep the mood light, despite his worries, so Lily's surroundings would be as conducive to an uncomplicated labor as possible.

John's grin widened. "Well, I'll never be a great chef, but," he indicated the bowl Lily was holding in her hands, "this is my specialty. I hope it isn't too spicy."

"Now I have to try this!" Lily took a spoon from the table and dipped it into the soup, then blew on the steaming liquid to cool it. Finally she put the spoon to her lips and let the soup flow into her mouth and over her tongue slowly, savoring it. Both men were watching her closely. After a few seconds she swallowed, looking at John wide-eyed. "It doesn't just smell delicious, it also tastes delicious!"

John bowed his head and held out a chair for her. "My humblest thanks, Milady."

Lily laughed as she sat down. "Drop that, or I'll get even more spoiled than I already am!"

"Yes, John. Stop it, or she'll be insufferable. Ouch!" Luke looked up at Lily with an exaggerated hurt expression on his face. "I was only agreeing with you!"

"You weren't meant to," Lily murmured with a grin, then they all went silent as they enjoyed John Matheson's special chicken soup.

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The door opened and Gideon and Deborah turned to see Kirrin and one of the guards struggling with an odd-looking chair. Gideon grabbed a sheet and covered Deborah with it. It was one thing to have Alwyn see her naked when she was giving birth to his child, but he didn't see why every guard in the castle should get that opportunity.

Alwyn grunted in satisfaction. "Good. I didn't think you were going to get it here in time."

Kirrin looked apologetic. "We had to bring it up from the village. There isn't one in the castle."

Deborah went into another contraction and Gideon helped her kneel upright, bracing himself to take her weight again as she leaned into him. When the contraction had passed, he looked round and saw that the chair had been set up by the side of the bed. Deborah let go of his neck and dropped back on her heels again, giving him a chance to turn to Alwyn and ask, "What is that? It looks like some form of medieval torture. You're not going to put her in that, are you?"

Alwyn smiled at him. "Of course not. I'm going to put *you* in it, Captain." Gideon glared at him as he went on. "It's a Brakiri birthing chair. Fortunately, Brakiri and human reproductive organs are very similar so it will do very well for Demon. It will help put her in the best position for getting the baby out."

"But you just said that you were going to put *me* in it. In case you haven't noticed, *I'm* not the one having the baby!"

Alwyn chuckled. "I had noticed. But the one thing missing from a birthing chair is human contact, and a woman giving birth needs that contact more than anything. The most important thing is for her to feel loved and wanted. So *you* will sit on the chair, and then *she* will sit on you."

Gideon looked at the chair that seemed to have no seat but did have two extensions from the back that were obviously intended to support the legs. He was half convinced that this was a plot to cause him maximum indignity and discomfort, but resigned himself to the inevitable. "All right. Just tell me what to do."

A few moments later, Gideon was in the chair, his legs spread wide, and the whole thing was tilted back at a 60-degree angle. Deborah sat with her legs hooked over and outside his, her body leaning back on his chest, her hands gripping the arms of the chair, his arms around her, just below her breasts. She was heavy and he knew that as time went on, she would feel heavier, but with her weight evenly distributed along his thighs and across his torso, he didn't feel totally crushed. In fact, it was almost comfortable and having her pressed against him and his arms around her felt good, although he could tell that after a while, he might find breathing more difficult than he'd prefer. [What the hell? Who needs to breathe, anyway?] He moved one hand to pull her hair back from her neck, and kissed her gently. "Comfortable?" he asked.

She laughed softly. "As comfortable as I can be, yes."

Alwyn smiled at the couple in the chair, saying, "I first read about using a birthing chair like this in a book by a 20<sup>th</sup> century human writer. It seemed to be an excellent way of making sure that the father

shared the full joys of labor. You are enjoying yourself, aren't you, Captain?"

Gideon silently wished for a time machine to go back and shoot the writer concerned, then smiled broadly at the Technomage. "Wouldn't have missed it for the world." Then another contraction hit.

Alwyn had jacked the chair up so that he could sit between their legs and see what progress the baby was making. Gideon couldn't see him very well as Deborah's belly got in the way, but suddenly the Technomage's head popped up. "He's crowning."

"What does that mean?" Gideon growled in frustration at his own ignorance.

"Really, Captain, you should have attended parenting classes and then you'd know all these things. What sort of father are you going to make if you can't even be bothered to turn up to class?" Alwyn smiled maliciously.

"Cut the crap, Alwyn. Just tell me what's happening."

"The top of the baby's head is now visible externally." He looked up at Deborah, who was panting for air as she recovered from the last contraction. "On the next contraction, push as hard as you can, my dear. Not much longer now."

The next few moments were a blur, a mix of Deborah's screams with Alwyn's words of encouragement--the only one of which that made sense to Gideon was his repeated exhortation to push. Deborah's response gave him new respect for her vocabulary, but made him decide that they needed to have a talk about exactly what language was appropriate for use around babies--[and starship Captains.] Somewhere amongst the screaming, shouting and swearing, he could have sworn he heard thunder. He puzzled for a moment, and then recognized what he'd heard: a ship taking off.

Gideon's first instinct was to leap up but he quickly realized that it wasn't an option. He couldn't see what was happening, but from Alwyn's words, he could tell that the baby was nearly out. Deborah was still screaming abuse and he could feel every muscle in her body straining to push. Feeling totally useless, he did the only thing he could; he held her.

With a deep groan, Deborah collapsed back against Gideon and there was a moment of blessed silence, broken by a loud wail. Gideon looked over her shoulder and down the length of her body and saw Alwyn's head come up again, quickly followed by his hands. In them he held a baby: red, wrinkled, and covered in blood and some white stuff that Gideon thought looked particularly disgusting.

Alwyn was smiling broadly as he placed the baby on Deborah's belly. "You have a beautiful baby boy. Congratulations." The baby continued to wail as Alwyn's head disappeared from view again and Gideon watched as Deborah gently held the baby against her.

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After they'd eaten their early breakfast--and after another of the painful contractions--John, with the help of a Brakiri guard, had brought Lily the big cushions from her lounging pit, the two books that were on the window seat, and the harp. While he and Luke helped her create a stable pile with the cushions, Luke chuckled, "You just want to keep us busy, don't you?"

Lily grinned and answered, "Someone around here has to keep a cool head, don't you think?" causing him to laugh out loud.

"I really feel like taking a nice warm bath now," Lily said suddenly, looking up from the book she was reading while kneeling on the floor and leaning forward on the pile of big cushions.

Luke looked up from the medical journal he was reading. Sarah Chambers had given him some data pads with the newest editions of several publications. This gave him the chance to catch up on the latest developments. He smiled. "Sure. Everything OK?"

"Just the occasional..." Lily flinched and pushed herself up on the cushions, then said in a strained voice, "Here we go again." She was breathing deeply and moving her hips rhythmically.

Luke and John, who had been sitting beside Luke reading a book, got up and knelt down on either side of her. John was rubbing her lower back while Luke scanned her and the babies. He already knew the results before they appeared on the screen: everything was normal. [What is going on here?]

When Lily finally sank back on her heels and rested her head on the pillows, hugging them tightly with her eyes closed, Luke told John, "Would you start running the water? Not too hot, just comfortably warm."

John nodded and went into the adjoining bathroom to prepare everything.

Luke was now rubbing Lily's back, and smiled when she sighed contentedly. "Tell me when you're ready to get up."

Lily snorted. "I can still get up by myself, thank you very much, doctor." She opened her eyes, looking at Luke warmly, letting him see she was only teasing him, even though she wasn't smiling.

Luke went along and assumed an apologetic expression. "I am so sorry, Milady. I didn't mean to insult you."

Lily's eyes were sparkling with mischief as she grumbled, "Better not," then broke into a wide grin. She pushed herself off the cushions, taking Luke's hand when he offered it.

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Lily was enjoying her soak in the warm water tremendously. It helped her relax, and the contractions were easier to bear like this. At the moment, she was squatting and leaning her head on her hands at the edge of the tub.

The temperature was perfect, as the doctor had ordered. She had asked Luke and John to leave her alone for a bit, and they had left the door half open so they could hear her call.

Suddenly, Lily felt another contraction start. She moaned loudly, and after a few seconds, John came in and squatted down in front of her, followed by Luke, scanner in hand. "Everything all right?"

Lily nodded, pushing herself up on the edge of the tub so Luke could scan her. [Not that I think this will get him anywhere, but as long as it helps calm him.] When she was at the height of pain, she heard a sound like thunder. At first she was unsure if she imagined it, but then she noticed John's head jerk towards the window, which showed only darkness outside.

With a start, John recognized the thundering sound of the shuttle lifting off. He had to suppress his



instinct to jump up and run out to see what was going on. He pressed his lips together, then murmured with a frown, "Well, it seems Lucas' pilot found a way to free himself and overwhelm the guards. I only hope he didn't hurt them."

Lily bowed her head low, letting wet locks of red hair fall in front of her face like a curtain so her men couldn't see her sad smile and the single tear that was running down her cheek.

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Deborah was still regaining her breath but after a moment spoke quietly. "Matthew?"

Gideon leaned his head forward and kissed her neck. "Still here. Hadn't planned on going anywhere just yet."

She chuckled. "Have you had a good look at him? I hate to say it, but that has to be the *ugliest* looking baby in the galaxy."

The Captain started to laugh. "I'm glad you said that. He really is an ugly little bastard isn't he? What's all that white stuff? Are they always that red and wrinkled? Or is it just because he came out early? I think he's undercooked, so maybe we should pop him back in until he's properly done." Gideon used the words to swallow the lump in his throat and the sense of pride and affection that was threatening to overwhelm him.

Alwyn's head popped up again, and he frowned in disapproval. "Wonderful parents you two are going to make! He's a perfect and particularly handsome specimen. Now if you'll stop distracting me, I'm much less likely to make a mistake while cutting the umbilical cord and instead cut something else down here!" His head disappeared again.

Gideon called after him. "Hey! I know she said that she didn't want any more kids, but I'm not ready for a vasectomy just yet!"

Deborah was laughing softly as he held her. After a while, Alwyn reappeared and lifted the baby gently off her abdomen. "I'll get Kirrin to clean him up while I do the necessary repairs." He turned and passed the baby to the Brakiri mid-wife who left the room, then he sat back down.

Gideon was trying to look over Deborah's shoulder and belly to see what the Technomage was doing. "Repairs? What does he mean, repairs?"

Alwyn looked up and held up a regenerator. "Just a little tearing, nothing serious. We'll soon fix it with this."

Gideon felt sick. He lifted his hand to caress Deborah's cheek. "Tearing? You tore? There? Christ, that must have hurt! Are you all right?"

Deborah turned her head into his hand. "I'm fine. Sore as hell, but fine. And it didn't hurt as much as you might think. Everything else was hurting too much at the time to really notice." She stiffened in his arms. "Alwyn! There's another contraction coming. Get ready."

Gideon was totally confused. "But you've had the baby. What's going on?"

Alwyn reappeared and shook his head in exasperation. "Really, Captain. I thought the military always

made sure they were properly briefed. It's the placenta, the afterbirth. This is the third and final stage. Once the placenta has been safely delivered, it's all over. Apart from the rest of your life being a parent, of course. Now the real fun begins!"

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Ilas listened to Max and Dureena's calm breathing as she lay awake beside them in her bed. She hadn't been able to sleep with so many things on her mind.

For the umpteenth time that night, she closed her eyes and called out to Demon. Still nothing! It was possible that their link had been disrupted by Demon's labor, but surely she should have given birth by now? What made it worse was that Ilas couldn't contact Lily, either. Did that mean that Demon was in so much pain that it totally obliterated the link? Or worse? The thought of something happening to Demon, or her son... [No one should have to suffer what Dureena has!]

Frustrated, Ilas flipped back the covers and got up, fumbling for her clothes in the darkness. When she found them, she grabbed the item that lay on top of the pile and tried to work out what it was and how to position it to put it on. [Right, it's...] Suddenly a voice whispered directly behind her, "Going for a moonlight walk?"

Ilas's blouse slipped from her hands as she jumped and whirled around to find Dureena standing there. "You are entirely too good at moving without making any noise!" she hissed--after she had taken a deep breath to calm down. Dureena just looked at her, the slightest hint of a grin on her lips.

Ilas sighed, "I have to find out how Demon and her baby are. I can't contact her or Lily, and..."

"Don't you think they would have called you if something was wrong with your sister or with her baby?" Dureena interrupted her, a sympathetic look in her eyes. Family meant much to her, all the more since she didn't have one of her own anymore. "And she's in good hands with Luke and Alwyn around, don't you think?"

Ilas nodded reluctantly and sighed. "You're right. I'd probably only get in the way and make everybody nervous."

Dureena noticed that Ilas was still depressed. "What is it that's really troubling you, Ilas?" she asked softly.

Ilas looked at her for a few seconds, then softly sighed again. "My thoughtlessness may cost Demon or her son dearly! And by breaking my link with Lily, I weakened the block enough for Lucas to sense that something was wrong. He could have killed Angel! I let myself be blinded by rage and my wish for revenge. But I swear, I won't let that happen again, ever." She bit her lip as a voice inside her head said, [Maybe your promise comes too late?] Ilas held back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

Dureena hugged her and felt Ilas cling to her as she buried her head in her shoulder like a terrified child. She said softly, "You can't change what you did, no matter how much you wish you could. Demon knows you're there if she needs you, and that's all that matters. And we caught the murderers of my baby, after all." Swallowing the pain and anger that welled up in her with the memory, she stood back and smiled at Ilas. "Come on, get some sleep. You need energy for two." With that, she turned around and glided towards the bed again, taking Ilas by the hand and pulling her with her. She didn't notice the stricken look on Ilas' face.

[What will she do when she finds out?] Ilas forced herself to calm down as she automatically followed Dureena. [That remains to be seen, after we get some sleep.] Her hand lovingly stroked her swollen belly as she slipped back into bed and Dureena's embrace.

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Gideon stood by the side of the bed, looking down at Deborah as she lay on her side, asleep. Completely exhausted, she'd held the baby for a few moments when Kirrin brought him back, cleaned and wrapped in a warm blanket, but couldn't keep her eyes from drifting shut. Alwyn had gently taken the baby from her and put him in a crib at the foot of the bed. Deborah had slid down onto her side and fallen asleep instantly.

Gideon looked over at Alwyn who was standing by the crib, smiling down at the baby. The Captain asked softly. "How long will she sleep?"

Alwyn sighed and whispered back. "Captain, I'm a Technomage, not a fortune-teller, and I left my crystal ball at home today. How should I know how long she'll sleep? But if she doesn't wake up sooner, the baby will probably wake her in three or four hours, as he'll need feeding."

Gideon leaned forward and kissed Deborah's forehead, then turned. "I have some things I need to do. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Will you stay with her?" Alwyn nodded and Gideon left the room.

He walked across the infirmary to the operating room where Chambers was still working on Lucas. Two guards stood outside the door. Gideon looked through the glass window in the door and could see three more guards inside, standing by the walls. Sarah stood alone in the center of the room, bent over Lucas, her back to the door. Her patient was face down on the table, hooked up to a maze of equipment and breathing apparatus. From where Gideon stood, Lucas looked very dead, but he assumed that there must be some life signs or Sarah wouldn't still be working on him.

Gideon knocked gently on the door, and Chambers turned to look at him. She carefully lowered the instrument she'd been using and walked towards the door, gesturing him to open it, but stopping well inside the room.

"Will he live?" Gideon asked as he opened the door. He didn't care that much either way, but remembered Galen's anxiety on the subject.

Chambers frowned. He couldn't see the lower half of her face, as she had a mask over her mouth and nose. "Maybe. I've got him stabilized and I've stopped most of the internal bleeding, but I can't get the knife out. It's wedged between two vertebrae and the edge is hard against his spinal cord. The slightest move in the wrong direction and I could cut the cord and leave him paralyzed from the chest down. I need some help here, Captain."

Gideon considered. He wasn't prepared to order Luke to leave Lily and even if he did, Luke wasn't one of his crew any more--he could tell Gideon to take a hike. But there was an alternative. "Alwyn's free now. Could he help?"

Sarah nodded. "That would help a lot, and if he's free, I assume that Demon has had the baby?" Gideon nodded and smiled. "Congratulations, Captain." He could see the mask move as she smiled back at him.

He went back and asked Alwyn if he would help Sarah and when the Technomage agreed, they

arranged for Kirrin to stay with Deborah. The Captain moved onto his next task.

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Gideon stood on the battlements, looking down at the plain below, the pre-dawn light just sufficient to see exactly what he expected. One ship, black, with two large, golden dragons on the delta wings. Nothing else. Lucas' ship wasn't there. Gideon suppressed a surge of irritation. It didn't really matter that the ship had gone. The pilot had been hired to do a job and wasn't guilty of anything as far as they knew, but allowing him to escape was sloppy and the Captain wanted to know how it had happened. He decided that it could wait another half hour while he went back to Deborah's rooms and took a shower. He was soaked in his own and Deborah's sweat and had noticed that the guards in the infirmary had flinched when he approached. [Maybe that was why Sarah stayed well inside the operating room.]

Entering their rooms, Gideon stripped as he made his way to the bathroom and dropped everything but his boots into the laundry basket. He resisted the temptation to linger under the shower and emerged, toweling his hair dry, a few moments later. With one longing glance at the bed, which he knew he wouldn't be occupying for a while yet, Gideon dressed quickly in clean clothes, pulled on his leather jacket for warmth against the cool dawn air and started to leave the bedroom. His eye caught the teddy bear he'd brought for the baby as it sat where they'd left it, on the bedside table. Smiling to himself, he scooped it up and tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket, where it was well hidden from view.

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It had been hours earlier when Nikarran approached the door of the cell where Angel was being held. As he came to a halt just in front of the door, he nodded at the two guards whom Gideon had ordered to be posted there. The Brakiri quickly explained his instructions. He was there to take Mistress Angel to see Captain Gideon, and they could go off duty now. Without hesitation, they unlocked the door and let him inside, then left.

Angel was sitting on the small bed in the corner of the dimly lit cell. Her back was against the wall, her legs drawn up against her chest and her arms wrapped around them tightly. Her eyes were fixed, unseeing, on the tray of uneaten food on the mattress in front of her.

Nikarran paused just inside the doorway, calling Angel's name softly, waiting for her to respond. He moved closer, until he was standing directly beside the bed. He looked down at her, saddened by her appearance. She looked broken and beaten down, completely unaware of his presence. The vacancy in her eyes made him wonder for a moment if all that had happened to her had somehow broken her mind. He called to her again, this time a little louder, but still didn't reach her. The Guard Captain hesitated for a moment. He had to get her attention, and he didn't know how much time he had to accomplish what he had been asked to do. He slowly raised his hand and gently touched Angel on her shoulder. Immediately the contact brought her from wherever she had been, and she looked up at him, her pale eyes haunted.

"Mistress Angel, your sister Mistress Demon has sent me&hellip;" His explanation was cut off as Angel suddenly leaped off the bed to stand in front of him. The questions she launched at him were filled with pain and confusion.

"Lucas? How's Lucas? Oh God, please don't tell me he's dead? I didn't mean for it to happen like that! I just wanted to stop him! I didn't want him hurt. I'm so sorry, I didn't want this to happen. He can't

die! Please?"

Nikarran could see that Angel was getting more distressed and knew he had to calm her. He reached for her shoulders, holding them gently. "He's alive, Mistress. Dr. Chambers is doing everything she can for him."

Angel looked at him for a long moment. When she finally spoke, her voice was thick with emotion and fear. "Is he going...?" Her voice cracked, and she had to clear her throat before she could continue. "Is he going to die?" She stood watching expectantly, waiting for his answer, but Nikarran hesitated for so long that she became distressed and began to ramble.

"Oh God! He can't die! Please, I have to see him. Why have I been locked up in here? Have I done something wrong? Is it because of Lucas? I'm sorry. I really didn't want that to happen. Where's Demon? Why haven't my sisters come to get me?" The last question was a whisper, as Angel's voice tightened and she looked at him for answers.

Nikarran looked at her, wishing that he could answer her questions and calm her. She looked as if she could shatter before his very eyes at any second. He reached into the pocket of his uniform for the thing that he knew would answer her questions. He took out a folded letter and handed it to her. For a moment, Angel didn't seem to register that he was handing her something, then she reached out a shaky hand and took it from him. She stared at it for a little while, and then she looked back up at him, her eyes questioning.

"It's a letter from Mistress Demon. It will explain things," Nikarran said softly. Then he stood and waited for her to read it.

Angel looked down at the letter in her hands for a moment, then she opened it and began to read.

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My darling Angel,

I've missed you so much that I don't have the words to describe the pain that losing you has caused me. I didn't think that it was possible to miss someone as much as I've missed you. I know that we've always fought and got under each other's skin, but from the day we met I've loved you and nothing could ever change that. That's why it's so difficult to tell you that you can't stay. You must leave immediately.

What I'm going to tell you is the hardest thing I've ever had to say. Lily, Ilas and I know that you can't have had any idea of what you did when you brought Lucas back. We know that if you'd known the price that had to be paid for his return, you would never have done it. But others don't share that knowledge and they want to punish you for what you did then. The thing that breaks my heart is that Matthew is one of those people and I need to protect you from him and from what he must do.

Angel, darling, the price paid for Lucas' rebirth was terrible. We

went over the spells you used and we know that you only read as far as you needed, to find out how to bring him back. We know that you didn't continue to find out the cost. This is what I have to tell you now. That a life had to be given for a life, and when Lucas lived again, someone had to die. There is no easy way to say this. The life that was given was Dureena's child. The child died when Lucas lived. Please, please believe me when I tell you that we *know* that you didn't realise this and would never have carried out the spell had you known.

But Dureena doesn't know that and Matthew promised her that he would bring the people responsible for her baby's death to justice, and they think that those people are you and Lucas. If you're reading this, it means that you've been captured, but we can't allow Matthew to fulfil his promise to Dureena. We don't believe in their justice and don't believe that you would receive fair treatment at their hands. So you must leave, and we will do what we can to help.

Nikarran will bring this letter when it's safe for you to go. He will take you back to the ship and go with you when you leave. We can't bear for you to be alone and don't trust whoever Lucas is using to fly the ship. Nikarran will take care of you and stay with you. Lily has given him all of her jewellery, which you can sell when you reach somewhere safe. I wish I had something to offer you, but all I can give is my love, which you will always have, no matter how far apart we are or how long it is before we see each other again.

It breaks my heart not to be able to see you and spend time with you while you're here, but it isn't safe for me to visit you. Lily and I have to keep Matthew and John away from you while Nikarran takes you away. I hope that somewhere you can find a new and happier life, and I long for the day when it will be safe for us to be together again. Never doubt how much I love you and miss you.

Your loving sister,

Deborah

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Nikarran watched as Angel read the letter from her sister. While he hadn't seen the letter itself, he knew that it must tell her about the death of Dureena's child and the promise that Captain Gideon had made to bring those responsible to justice. It saddened him to see how the things that had happened had driven the sisters apart, and how those same things could now drive Demon and Gideon apart. Nikarran could not see how Gideon would forgive Demon for arranging Angel's escape. But as he watched the light die in Angel's eyes, he knew that it was the right thing to do.

He'd had no opinion on whether Angel had known what she was doing when she brought Lucas back, but seeing the color drain from her face and her shoulders slump, Nikarran couldn't help but agree with her sisters. She hadn't known.

The Brakiri lunged forward and caught Angel as her knees gave way and her eyes rolled back, the letter dropping from her lifeless fingers to the ground. He laid her gently on the bed and dipped his hand into the glass of water sitting on the tray. He sprinkled the water over her face, then brought the glass to her lips and lifted her head to help her drink. As her eyes flickered open, Nikarran could see the pain and confusion there

Angel began to whisper. "I didn't know. He didn't tell me. He told me that no one would be hurt this time. I didn't know. Oh God, what have I done? What did I do? I wouldn't have done that, I couldn't. Not a baby. Oh no, not that. Please, not that."

Nikarran tried to get Angel to stand, but her legs wouldn't support her, so he swung her up into his arms and carried her. As he left the cell, she was still whispering in her confusion. His resolve strengthened. He'd agreed to help with Angel's escape because Demon had asked him, and he'd never been able to refuse her anything. Now he had another reason. The girl in his arms shouldn't be hurt again. He would take care of her as if she were his own daughter, as he had looked after his own daughter after her mother had died. As Nikarran looked down at Angel, he thought of his daughter, grown now and married, but much the same age as Angel. His daughter no longer needed his protection, but Angel did. She was not of his species or his family, but he would now take care of her until she recovered and for as long as she needed him thereafter.

Carrying her to his office, Nikarran carefully lowered her feet to the ground. Angel managed to stand, but her eyes were still unfocused and she continued to whisper incoherently. He picked up the bag that he'd left there, containing a few of his own possessions, but mainly things that Angel's sisters had packed for her, including the jewelry that would bring them credits to live on when they reached their destination. The most important contents were the various identity papers he'd taken from Lucas when he'd found him alone in the infirmary. Dr. Chambers had gone to prepare for surgery and hadn't seen the Brakiri going through Lucas's pockets and finding those papers. Nikarran swung the bag over his shoulder, then gently steered Angel out of the office and out of the castle.

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Angel was barely conscious of walking and had no idea where she was being taken. Her mind was turned inward, and she had no capacity to focus on the outside world. Her thoughts were a jumble as they leaped from one subject to another. She thought of Lucas and how he'd deceived her. He'd told her again and again that no one had suffered when she'd brought him back. She'd thought it was too easy and she'd been right, but he'd lied to her over and over again. How could he have done that? And how could he have done something as evil as stealing the life of an unborn child? What sort of monster did that make him? Angel finally saw Lucas for what he was--lying, manipulative, obsessed with controlling everything around him, driven by the need for power, and she had given him the life he needed to obtain all the things he wanted. Her stupidity and gullibility had loosed this monster from the oblivion where he belonged.

But Angel still loved him. What sort of person did that make her? Was she evil too, for loving someone evil? She must be, to have enabled Lucas to do what he had done. If she was indeed evil, then she deserved to be punished. She lifted her head and just for a moment, became aware that she was being steered down the hill towards the plain below. Darkness still surrounded them, but she knew that there

was a ship there, Lucas' ship, and she was being taken to it.

Angel started to struggle, to try to escape the firm grip in which her arm was held. She didn't want to go back to the ship. That was where Lucas had made love to her and she'd let him. Knowing that he was planning to kidnap her sister, she'd let Lucas make love to her, and worse, she'd enjoyed every moment of it. She must be evil to have enjoyed it so much, so she should be punished. She should go back to the castle and allow Gideon to punish her. Perhaps he would just kill her--she deserved that. Angel just hoped that he would be quick and wouldn't hurt her as Lucas had hurt her, as Lucas had allowed Smith to hurt her. But the hand that held her arm wouldn't let go, and she was forced onwards toward the ship that was now looming out of the darkness.

Her thoughts shifted again. Where would they go? She couldn't go back to Babylon 5. She was known there and Lucas might come looking for her. Angel shook her head, trying to remember why that thought was wrong. [Of course, Lucas has been captured; he can't come looking for me.] But she didn't believe her own thoughts. If Lucas were alive, he'd come after her. He'd escape somehow and come looking for revenge. He'd know that she'd betrayed him and her punishment would be terrible, but didn't she deserve to be punished? Perhaps she should go back to their apartment on B5 and wait for Lucas to come and kill her, but she knew that he wouldn't be merciful. Gideon might kill her quickly, but Lucas would make sure that she suffered. Just the thought of what Lucas might do froze Angel's blood.

How would she live without him? She'd never been alone. The only time she'd come close was when her mother had died, but then Demon had appeared and swept her up, comforting her, loving her, giving her a home and a family. Since then, Angel had never been alone, she'd always had her sisters, then Lucas. Could she live without any of them? She didn't think that she could. Perhaps she should go back and allow herself to be punished for her crimes. At least she wouldn't be alone. Perhaps Gideon would allow her to see Demon before he killed her. Angel tried to break free again but was held tightly.

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Nikarran kept a firm grip on Angel as she struggled to get away from him. He had no idea where she was trying to go, but his orders were clear. He had to get her on board the ship and away from Eriadne to a place where she'd be safe. As he approached the ship, the guards whom Matheson had left at the perimeter challenged him. He explained to them that they were no longer needed, that he was taking Mistress Angel on board the ship to show him where Lucas kept his weapons and papers. He watched as the five guards retreated back to the castle.

Turning to the ramp, Nikarran steered Angel forward, pushing her up into the control room. Four more guards were seated inside and the Drazi pilot was bound and gagged in the pilot's chair. Again, Nikarran dismissed the guards, telling them that replacements would be arriving soon. As their Captain, they didn't question his orders, and soon he was alone with Angel and the pilot. He gently pushed Angel into the main cabin at the back of the control room, dropping the bag on the bed, then watched as Angel sank in a heap on the floor. She was still lost in her own world of pain, and unconscious of events happening around her. The Brakiri left her sitting, staring at the floor, as he returned to the main control room to deal with the pilot.

He was becoming concerned at how long this all was taking. Another half hour would bring the first light before dawn, and he wanted to be aloft before daylight. Nikarran wondered for a moment about how Demon was coping with distracting Gideon. He'd seen her arrive in the infirmary on a stretcher and the other guards had told him that she had gone into labor. He wondered whether that was real or part of her plan to keep Gideon away from Angel.



Nikarran quickly explained his proposal to the pilot. If the Drazi took them somewhere safe, he could keep the ship. The Guard Captain explained that the alternative was arrest by Earthforce. Nikarran had no idea what the pilot might be charged with, but was relying on the fact that the Drazi would have a guilty conscience and would not wish to be arrested. The gamble paid off, and the pilot quickly agreed to the deal. Leaving a decision on the final destination until later, Nikarran returned to the cabin to prepare Angel for takeoff.

He found her still on the floor, but the contents of the bag were now spread around the room. Angel was on her knees, frantically scrabbling through the clothes that had been neatly packed for her, throwing shoes and other items around in her search. As she noticed Nikarran, she looked up, her face drawn with grief. "Where is it? Where's the letter? I've lost Demon's letter. I must find it! It's all I have from her. Please, help me find it. It must be here. Where is it? I've lost it. Oh God, how could I lose it? It's all I have... it's all I have..."

Angel curled up into a tight ball and rocked, whispering her pleas for him to find the letter. Nikarran remembered it dropping from her hand to the floor of the cell and knew that there was no going back for it. He lifted her gently to the bed and secured her for takeoff, then returned to the control room to take his own seat next to the pilot. The engines thundered into life, and the ship shook as they lifted. One of the screens showed the darkness behind them as they left the planet. Nikarran looked into the darkness and wondered if he would ever see Eriadne again.

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

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn

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