

The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn - Part 5: Conditional

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Alwyn's Technomage ship

Chapter 2

Lucas lifted through waves of unconsciousness, memories of betrayal and capture filtering through the fog that surrounded him. He slowly became aware that he was lying on his stomach, his head turned to one side, and the thing that he could vaguely make out in front of his face appeared to be his left hand. There was a black shape beyond the hand, and as he slowly refocused, the shape resolved itself into a tall blonde woman dressed in black, holding something. Whiplash. Demon. Deborah. Or whatever the hell she was calling herself today, and what she was holding was a baby.

Lucas tried to speak, but his mouth was totally dry. He watched as Demon stood, moved the baby to one arm, and picked up a beaker with a straw, then held it so Lucas could drink. He sipped gingerly, realized it was just water, and took enough to wet his mouth and throat, then pulled his head back. She sat back in the chair and watched him closely. He tried again, and this time words emerged, albeit in a croak.

"Hey, Whiplash. Brought my son to see me?"

She shook her head as she replied, "He's not your son, he's mine and Matthew's. But I wanted you to know that, just in case it was you fucking me when I conceived, and if there is some part of your spirit in him," Demon paused, choosing her words carefully. Lucas had to admire her willingness to face facts and call things what they were. No euphemisms, just a straight description of what they'd done.

They'd fucked and they both knew it.

She went on, "I'll fight it every day. You said he could go either way. Well, I'm going to make sure he goes my way. I've called him Marcus, and that's partly to remind me of you. That way, I'll never forget what I have to fight." She got up from the chair, and he realized she was going to leave.

"Wait a minute. There are a couple of questions I need to ask." Lucas' voice was stronger this time. Demon stopped and looked down at him, waiting for him to continue. "Where's Angel?"

He watched the expressionless mask drop over her features and knew that the mask hid pain. "Gone. I had to get her away from here, or she would have shared your punishment, whatever that might be. I know she would never have brought you back if she'd known the price, and I couldn't allow her to suffer any more."

Lucas thought about her answer, trying to decide whether he was pleased or annoyed that Angel had escaped. He needed the answer to another question before he could make up his mind. "Was it Angel who betrayed me? Did she tell you I was coming here?" It was frustrating that Demon stayed out of reach. If he could have touched her, he would have been able to take all of this straight from her mind.

She shook her head. "We don't know. The message was anonymous." Well at least that confirmed he had been betrayed. It wasn't just bad luck that he'd turned up when the Space Cadet was in residence.

"You wouldn't be lyin' to me now, would you, darlin'?" Lucas didn't trust what he was told, only what he could read for himself.

Demon shook her head again. "I don't lie, Lucas. I don't always tell the whole truth, but if I don't think you should know something, I'll just refuse to answer. Don't judge everyone by your own standards. Why are you asking about Angel, anyway?"

Lucas told himself that it was a good question. Why should he care what had happened to Angel? Apart from the fact that if she'd been the one to betray him, he'd hunt her down and slit her throat, but only after she found out what *real* pain felt like. But if it hadn't been Angel who had betrayed him, did he care what happened to her? He was surprised to find that he did. He ignored Demon's question and asked the second thing he needed to know.

"Tell me, Whiplash, has Space Cadet gotten the doctors to put some kind of spinal block on me?" Lucas saw Demon frown, obviously not understanding what he was getting at, which was not good news. He explained more. "I can't feel a thing below the middle of my back. If I've got legs, I'm damned if I know where they are. I wondered if it was some sort of restraint to make sure I don't go anywhere."

Demon shifted the baby to her shoulder, freeing her right arm again, and moved down his body. By turning his head as far as it would go, Lucas could just see her reaching out to touch the blanket covering the back of his legs. [So that's where they are.]

"Can you feel that?" He could see her hand resting on the back of his thigh, but he couldn't feel it.

"Not a thing, darlin', but if you'd care to move your hand a bit higher, I'd love to feel that." Demon half laughed as she pulled her hand away and saw Lucas grinning at her, then she frowned.

"I know they said that the knife had grazed your spinal cord. Perhaps it did more damage than they thought. Don't worry, there are instruments here that can help regenerate damaged nerve tissue. I'm

sure this can be fixed." Lucas could see the concern in Demon's face as she moved back up the bed and stood by his head. She reached out to brush away a lock of hair that had fallen over his eyes. He caught her hand and pulled the tips of her fingers to his lips, kissing them gently.

"That big heart of yours will be your downfall, Whiplash. Don't you know that I'm the bad guy? You're not supposed to be kind to me. One of these days, I'll get loose and I'll come after you again, and next time I'll take my son and probably kill you." The brief contact with her fingertips enabled him to verify that she'd been telling him the truth.

Lucas looked up at Demon as she slowly pulled her hand away and looked at him sadly. "Is kindness so hard to take, Lucas? You have to chase it away with threats? I'll tell Luke you're awake. I'm sure he'll know what to do to repair the damage."

She started to walk toward the door and he called after her, "Just stating the facts, darlin'." As she reached the door and opened it, Lucas spoke to her for the last time. "Deborah." She stopped dead in her tracks at his use of that name, but kept her back to him. "Thank you for showing me my son." She left the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

"I'm sorry, but I was held up." Demon put Marcus' basket next to Faylinn and Dasha's cradle. He was sleeping soundly.

Lily handed her the camera and the second cube. "Too bad Ilas hasn't had her baby yet, but she'll surely make one after the birth, too."

Demon smiled. "I'm sure she will. We'll just have to be careful to stop her using the whole supply. They're scarce enough as it is." While she was talking, Demon held the camera above Marcus until she found the perfect frame, then took a picture. She could feel he was waking up, and waited until he had opened his eyes and looked straight up at her, smiling at him as she took another picture.

[[I'm sure Matthew will be very pleased,]] Lily said silently, looking up at Demon, who met her eyes and smiled sadly, then lifted Marcus out of the cot.

"Come on, we're not finished yet."

They'd taken more pictures of Marcus, and then Demon had asked John to take some of her with her son. "You've known Matthew for years now and you're his closest friend, so you know what he would like better than any of us," she'd said.

John had bowed his head and smiled. "I'm honored." He'd taken several pictures of them, when he asked Demon to sit down on the window seat.

She did, the bright sunlight making her blonde hair shine like a golden halo, and held Marcus upright, his head leaning against her shoulder so Matheson could see his profile.

He smiled and lifted the camera, ready to take another picture. "Perfect. Now think about Matthew, and how you'd like him to remember you both."

John could see Demon's cool mask crumble, and for a moment sadness showed, but she put that aside immediately, and a smile started to spread on her usually impassive face, her eyes sparkling with a deep and sincere love. Matheson took several pictures, knowing that if they could catch at least a fraction of the emotions that radiated from Demon, Gideon would be overwhelmed. "I'm glad Matthew has you, Demon," he said softly as he finally lowered the camera, looking at her sincerely.

For a moment, Demon lowered her eyes, trying to get her raging emotions under control, then looked back up into his, smiling mischievously. "Not as glad as I am."

Demon tucked Marcus into his cot and took the cube, looking at it thoughtfully. They had chosen eight pictures for Gideon's and Matheson's cube each, and as she held it in her hand the realization that Matthew would leave in a few hours started to really sink in. She shook these thoughts off and looked at Lily. *[[Would you discreetly ask Luke to go and see Lucas when he gets back? It seems Lucas can't feel anything below the middle of his back.]]*

Lily looked at her oddly, then her eyes widened in shock. *[[Tell me you didn't do what I think you did!]]*

Demon met her eyes coolly. *[[What do you think I did?]]*

Lily made a furious gesture, only partially aware that John was watching them closely, but she didn't care. *[[Don't try this with me, Demon. I know you too well! How could you?]]*

Demon shrugged. *[[Very easily.]]* She sighed when Lily's eyes bored into hers and her mind 'pushed' for the truth. She finally gave in. Looking down at Marcus, she stroked his back lightly. *[[Yes, we... I did go to see Lucas. So what?]]* She bit her lip as she realized that she'd just admitted to having taken Marcus with her. Lily might have forgiven her if she had visited Lucas alone, but Demon knew that her sister wouldn't be so ready to forgive her for having endangered her son. She hurriedly continued, *[[As long as Matthew doesn't know...]]*

[[What makes you so sure he won't find out?]]

Demon's head snapped up sharply. There had been no mistaking the threat in Lily's words. She clamped down on her anger and fear. *[[Why would you do that? You know he'd go berserk if he found out!]]*

Lily stared up at her, green eyes blazing as she gestured towards John, who was still standing beside the cradle, his eyes never leaving them. *[[Oh I wouldn't, but I'm sure John would tell his friend that you had taken his son to see the man who intends to kill you and take your baby away with him!]]*

Demon could feel tears well up in her eyes, and she swallowed hard, then took several deep breaths to get her emotions under control. From the corner of her eye, she could see John wince nonetheless, and at the same moment, Marcus stirred in the cot, whimpering slightly. *[[I'm sorry, my dear. Everything is OK. You just sleep.]]* she hurried to assure her son, amazed at the maternal instincts she felt, then looked at Lily again. *[[You wouldn't dare.]]* Even to herself she sounded very unsure.

Lily just stared her down.

[[Don't you realize what you'd do to us?]] She pleaded, *[[Matthew would never forgive me.]]*

[[It seems that you don't realize the danger you put yourself and Marcus in!]] Lily interrupted, a bit calmer than before, but still unyielding.

Demon sighed and looked out the window for several seconds, searching for words, then locked her eyes with Lily's. *[[I know that very well, better than anyone else here probably. But I had to do it. Can't you understand? Deep down, I... I'm still afraid that Lucas is the spiritual father of my child, and I had to confront that fear!]]*

Lily's expression turned from angry to shocked, then sad, as she felt the truth behind Demon's words. Finally, she flung herself at her big sister, hugging her tightly around her waist. *[[I'm so sorry, Demon. Of course I won't tell John. I'd never do anything to hurt you!]]*

Demon felt a wave of compassion and love surge through their link and wrapped her arms around Lily, stroking her red curls. *[[I know you wouldn't. You were only concerned for our safety. And I should really know better than to try and hide things from my sisters.]]* She felt a pang as she thought of Angel, who was now on her way to... somewhere, with Nikarran.

Lily looked up at her, tears in her eyes. *[[She's free now, she's still herself, and Nikarran will take good care of her.]]*

Demon smiled down at her sadly. *[[I know.]]* She wiped the tears from Lily's face as if she were a child. *[[And now let go of me before Matthew comes back from the meeting and wonders where his woman and child are.]]*

Lily sniffed, gave a short laugh and let go. *[[We can't have that, can we?]]*

Demon smiled, then looked at John. She could feel he was deeply concerned about what he'd just witnessed, but decided not to go into it. "In case we don't meet again before you leave, I wish you a good trip, John."

John nodded. "Thank you. I hope you and Marcus will be all right."

Demon could almost feel his eyes bore into her back when she left.

"What was all that about?"

Lily winced. She was still facing the door, and she dreaded what would come now. John had clearly not liked what had happened. He'd never seen the sisters fight before, and even if he didn't know what it had been about, it had been obvious it was something serious.

She turned around, eyeing him and biting her lip, looking like a child who'd been caught doing something wrong. "Nothing," she murmured.

"Nothing?" John echoed. "Well that was 'Much Ado About Nothing', I'd say!"

Lily looked at him silently, her eyes sad, then finally said, "I was stupid. I should have known Demon better than to think that she would..." She looked down at her clasped hands, biting her lip again.

"She would what?" John tried to coax her and walked towards her.

Lily looked up as he reached her, brows creased. "Don't ask me! Just don't ask, OK? Let's say it was just something between sisters."

He could tell she was suppressing her temper, and her eyes were pleading with him to let go of this topic. [And I really don't feel like fighting. These are our last hours together.]

He gave her a soft smile. "OK. I'm sorry."

Lily expelled a relieved breath and flung her arms around him. "Never mind. You were only concerned." She leaned into him, relaxing slowly as he hugged her, and finally sighed contentedly and looked up at him. "I love you, Sweet-Face."

John swallowed hard to hold back the tears that were threatening to rise. Finally he managed to say in a hoarse voice, "I love you, too, Fire-Lily."

When he got back from his meeting in Alwyn's ship, Raven got Demon's message about Lucas and went to see him in the side room where he was being held, wondering why Demon had been to see him. Her message had only told him that Lucas claimed to have no feeling below the middle of his back. As far as Raven could tell, the man had no feelings at all, but that was another matter. He was a patient, and as such, deserved the best treatment that Raven could give.

The guards outside the room acknowledged him as he entered. Luke was startled to find that there were no guards inside. [Demon must have sent them away so she could have some privacy.] He shook his head in concern that she had risked being alone with Lucas.

Lying on his stomach with the foot of the bed facing the door, Lucas couldn't see who entered the room, but from the way his head turned, Raven could tell that his entrance had been noticed. He walked to the side of the bed where Lucas could see him.

"Well, if it ain't my old friend Harvard. How're you doin', Doc? Find a jacket that fits you better than the one they gave you in Juniper?"

Raven looked down at the man in the bed. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Perhaps I should check your medication, I think you're hallucinating."

Lucas laughed softly. "Never mind, Doc. You had to be there. Let's just say that I had some interesting times with an ancestor of yours. As for now, what have you done to my back? Fucked up another procedure? If doctoring runs in the family, so does screwing up on your patients."

Raven took a small scanning device from his pocket and ran it over Lucas's back as he spoke. "I wasn't involved in the operation to remove the knife from your back. Dr. Chambers carried out that procedure. I know she was concerned that there was nerve tissue damage caused by the knife grazing your spinal cord." He looked at the readings on the small gray cylinder he was holding.

Lucas grinned up at him. "That's a mighty small thermometer you've got there, Doc. Sure it'll do the job?"

Raven sighed. "If we must play games, then yes, I can assure you that all of my equipment is more than adequate for the job at hand." He glared down at his patient.

Lucas smiled again. "Hey, you're more fun than your ancestor was," and watched as Raven ran the cylinder over his head, checking for neural damage, then continued, "but the injury's in my back, Doc. Seems like your aim's no better than your ancestor's."

Raven shook his head, having no idea what Lucas was talking about and unwilling to play word games any more. He moved up the bed to stand by Lucas's head before speaking.

"There's some trauma to the spinal cord. That's what's causing the paralysis and lack of sensation in your lower body."

Lucas was silent for a moment, his eyes closed. Raven wondered what was going through his mind at that moment. Was he afraid? Raven couldn't imagine this man ever admitting that he was scared of anything. Lucas opened his eyes and spoke softly. "Can you fix it? Or am I going to spend the rest of my life with a crick in my neck?" He moved his hand to rub the back of his neck where his current position, with his head twisted to one side, obviously caused him some discomfort.

Raven took another instrument from his pocket and ran it over the back of Lucas's neck as he spoke. "Fortunately for you, the equipment we found in this place can help you. A year ago, I wouldn't have had such good news. We can repair the damage, but it'll take time and repeated applications of the process. It could be several weeks before you're on your feet, but there's no medical reason why you shouldn't make a full recovery." He turned off the instrument and put it back in his pocket. "And that should fix the crick in your neck."

Luke watched as Lucas moved his head and neck around. "It did. Thanks, Doc. Don't you wish that you could get rid of every pain in the neck that easily?" He grinned up at Raven and went on. "Thanks for the good news. So what happens next? I'm damned sure that Batman and Robin don't plan on leaving me here with their ladies."

Raven shook his head. "No, you won't be staying here. They'll be transferring you to Alwyn's ship this afternoon and taking you back to the Excalibur. Captain Gideon will then formally charge you with the murder of Dureena's child, and you'll be kept in the secure wing of Medbay until he can deliver you to a planet with an Earth law court. If they find you guilty as charged, you'll be mind-wiped and your personality replaced by one motivated to serve the community. That's the current sentence for murder under Earth law." He watched to see how Lucas would react and wasn't surprised to see the knowing grin that he was already finding irritating.

"It'll never happen, Doc. A lot of people have tried to get rid of Lucas Buck before, but no one's done it yet. I don't see anything special about Batman, that makes him different."

Raven bent to speak softly into Lucas's ear. "Don't bet on it, Lucas. He's your descendant, isn't he? He might just surprise you." He straightened up and turned to leave. At the door, he looked back and spoke. "I'll be back with Dr. Chambers later, and we can start the treatments for your back. Don't go anywhere." He grinned and left the room.

Gideon lay on his stomach on the rug while Deborah's long, slender fingers kneaded and massaged his shoulders. He'd planned to spend his last afternoon on Eriadne organizing and supervising Lucas's

transfer to Alwyn's ship, but after their meeting, Sarah had made it quite clear that his interference was unwanted and unwelcome. She'd made it damned close to a medical order that he spend his remaining time with Deborah.

He hadn't argued for long and when he returned to their rooms, Gideon was convinced that Sarah and Deborah had been plotting behind his back. Deborah had been waiting for him, with Marcus in a carrying basket, and she had immediately dragged him out of the castle down to the lake. A large rug, cushions, towels, a sunshade, and a picnic basket awaited them there. [Oh yeah, there's been some serious collusion here.]

He'd watched as Deborah fed Marcus, then put the baby back in his basket in the shade. They went for a long, lazy swim, kissing, touching, stroking, and caressing each other until finally they'd scrambled ashore and lay down next to the basket. After they'd eaten, Deborah had decided that Gideon looked tense, and proceeded to massage his legs, back, and shoulders, lingering on his buttocks, which she claimed were totally knotted with tension. While he wasn't sure that buttocks could get knotted, he wasn't about to argue and thus let her proceed. Gideon was now half asleep, seriously aroused, and lazily anticipating what lay ahead when she started on his front.

He felt the ends of Deborah's hair tickling his back as she leaned down and kissed the nape of his neck then nibbled on his ear, whispering, "Turn over."

Gideon rolled onto his back and looked up at her as she knelt alongside him. Her hair was loose and covered her breasts, but she was otherwise naked. While Deborah's belly was much smaller than it had been, it was still swollen and she'd told him that she'd soon be exercising hard to get it back to its previous flatness. He reached out to stroke her belly.

"Your outie has turned back into an innie."

Deborah looked down at her navel and laughed. "So it has. I did think it looked strange sticking out like that. And speaking of things sticking out, that massage was supposed to be relaxing, but there's one part of you that's definitely not relaxed." She reached out and started to gently stroke and caress his engorged cock. Gideon closed his eyes and concentrated on enjoying whatever she had planned.

When she'd finished, she moved to lay her head on his shoulder and snuggle up to his side. Gideon put his arm around Deborah's shoulder and pulled her close, reaching over to cup her breast with his other hand.

They lay like that for nearly an hour, not moving or speaking, both trying to come to terms with the fact that he'd soon be leaving, and yet again, they had no idea when they'd see each other next.

Gideon let out a deep sigh. "I can't keep doing this. It gets worse every time."

He could feel Deborah nodding, her head still buried into his shoulder, but she didn't speak. Gideon knew she was doing everything she could not to cry and didn't trust herself to say anything. He had a lump the size of Mount Rushmore in his own throat, but forced words past it.

"I'm going to find a way for us to be together. I don't know how or when, but I'm not going to keep disappearing from your life like this."

Deborah nodded again, but still didn't speak. Gideon raised his hand to her chin and lifted it so he could look at her face, into the hazel eyes that he could drown in. "Cat got your tongue?" He smiled

down at her.

She smiled back and nodded again, then pulled his head down to kiss her. The kiss went on, gentle, tender, and passionate all at once. When Gideon finally pulled away to look at Deborah again, he was sure that the lump in his throat had somehow grown. Again, he forced words out.

"It wasn't so bad the first time. Those last two days we spent together were amazing, and I don't think I'd felt that good since taking command of the Excalibur, but I thought I'd get over the way I felt about you then." He smiled wickedly at her. "I thought that I'd just mark you down as another girl in another port."

Deborah smiled back and finally spoke. "There must have been enough of those over the years."

Gideon laughed and hugged her. "Dozens. Maybe hundreds." She punched him lightly on the arm and tucked her head back into his shoulder as he carried on. "But I couldn't get you out of my mind. I kept thinking about you, remembering how you looked when you first walked into that cell." He kissed the top of her head. "Do you have any idea how embarrassed I was?"

She lifted her head back up to look at him and grinned. "Oh yes. You went a beautiful shade of pink."

"Well, it was a unique experience, stretched out, naked, tied to a bed with the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life examining me. For all the interest you showed, I could have been a side of meat."

Deborah was laughing as she said, "Which just goes to show how good I used to be at hiding what I felt from you. I wanted you from the moment I saw you, and when I saw you naked on that bed, I nearly fainted. I threw myself out of that room to get you a robe, as I knew that if I didn't cover you, I'd take you back to my room and have my wicked way with you."

Gideon pushed back the hair from her face and smiled. "So you just waited a few hours until I recovered before you ravished me, eh?"

"Let's not get back onto who ravished whom, shall we? I think it's fair to say that neither of us was playing hard to get. So when did you decide that I wasn't just another name in your little black book? Or is it a big black book?"

He paused, stroking her hair while he considered. "I can't tell you a day or a moment when it happened. I guess I realized that you were different, special, when I found myself looking for any excuse to get back here, twisting arms, negotiating with Generals and calling in every favor owed to me to get that working vacation back here again. Then, when I got here, and you weren't waiting for me, I thought I'd been an idiot, that I wanted a woman who didn't give a damn about me. When I think how close I came to turning around and going back with the shuttle, it scares me. What if Ilas hadn't called me back? I might never have seen you again, never known you were pregnant. I could have missed seeing Marcus, being with you--everything." Gideon's voice displayed his dismay at the thought.

Deborah chuckled. "And missed having him throw up on you, missed changing his diapers, missed having him wake you up in the middle of the night?"

Gideon held her close and kissed her again. "I'll miss all of those things when I'm back on the Excalibur, but most of all, I'll miss you."

Deborah pulled away and looked at him longingly, then whispered, "How much more time do we

have?" He checked the timer on his commlink.

"About an hour, but I need to get back to the castle and pack, so we'd better make a move." Gideon started to move his arm, and she grabbed his hand quickly.

"No, you don't need to do anything. I packed your things while you were out this morning and arranged for them to be taken to Alwyn's ship. You can go straight there from here. I wanted us to have every moment we could together." He subsided and put his arm back around her.

"Wonderful planning. I could do with someone who plans ahead on my crew. Ever thought of joining Earthforce? I could take you on as my logistics officer." Gideon paused. "Hell, no, that wouldn't work. No fraternizing with junior officers." He reached up to run his thumb along her cheekbone. "And whenever we're together, I want to fraternize with you."

Deborah turned her head and kissed his shoulder, then changed the subject. "How did your meeting go this morning?"

"Well. Sarah and Alwyn are really excited about the possibilities for creating a new Technomage virus that we can tailor into a permanent viral screen. They think there's a good chance that within a few weeks we could have it cracked. The final piece of the puzzle will be in place, and we can go back to Earth and start curing people."

Deborah looked up at him and lifted her hand to his face. "That's wonderful, Matthew, but what happens then? Do you get a new job? Do you keep the Excalibur? What do you want, Matthew?"

Gideon took her hand and kissed it, then held it in his, on his chest. "What I want is six months paid paternity leave. What I'll get is another matter. I have no idea what they'll offer me next. It may be a desk job, or it might be a ship. Whatever it is, I'll make sure that it's something where we can be together." He saw her start to speak and placed his fingers on her lips. "Don't say it. I know all the problems involved in you leaving here, but we'll find an answer. Somehow."

Deborah held his hand to her mouth and kissed his fingers without speaking. They lay unmoving and in silence for the next half hour, then Gideon sighed and moved his arm from around her. "I have to go. By the time we get dressed and walk to Alwyn's ship, it'll be time to leave."

She hugged him tightly, then let go, standing and reaching for her dress. She turned to the basket where their son had miraculously remained asleep for three successive hours. Reaching into the basket, Deborah produced a small cube, about ten centimeters on each side, which she passed to Gideon, saying, "I have a gift for you."

Gideon looked down at the cube, puzzled. It was a murky gray, but the surface looked wet, while it felt dry. He looked up at her and asked, "What is it?"

Deborah reached across and touched a corner. Instantly the wet, gray appearance dissolved and was replaced by an image that filled the cube. It was a 3-D picture of Marcus, sleeping in his cot. Gideon laughed and looked closely. "You know, I think he's improving with age." He was about to thank her when Deborah reached over and touched another corner. The image changed, this time it was Marcus lying on his back staring up at him.

She explained. "It's something the Vorlon left. It holds eight images. We only have a few of them, but Lily and I made one each for you and John this morning. Touch each corner in turn to see the different

images."

He did as he was instructed and one after another, five separate images of Marcus appeared. In the sixth, he was on the floor on a rug while Deborah bent over him, her hair falling forward. Gideon wanted to reach into the image to push back that hair and see her beautiful face. He looked up to see her smiling, and she nodded at him to press the next corner. He looked back down as he pressed and the image shifted again.

The seventh image showed Deborah sitting in a chair, her dress opened at the breast as she fed Marcus, her head lowered to gaze at the baby. Gideon's heart turned inside him at the beauty of the picture, and he swallowed hard to suppress the tears that threatened to fill his eyes.

He looked up at her again and reached out to caress the side of her face. She smiled at him and whispered. "I think the last one is the best."

Gideon could hardly bring himself to look away from her back down to the cube, but somehow he dragged his eyes away and touched the last corner.

Deborah's image looked out at him, a gentle smile on her face as she gazed into his eyes. She held Marcus against her shoulder, turned so the baby's face was in profile. It was so real and alive that Gideon felt as if he could reach into the image and touch her. He pulled her close to his chest, arms tightly around her while he held the cube gently in one hand. He buried his face into her hair, inhaling deeply, savoring her scent, trying to memorize it. When he looked back at her face, it was wet, so he reached up to wipe away her tears before he spoke. "I'm going to find a way so that we don't have to keep doing this. I promise. I'm going to find a way for us to be together."

Gideon let Deborah go and reached down to pick up the basket holding the baby. Moving to stand beside her, he put his free arm around her waist, and they walked down to the plain where Alwyn's ship awaited him.

John lay in the lounging pit with Lily and Luke snuggled against him on either side.

After Luke had come back from seeing Lucas--Lily had given him Demon's message when John was in the bathroom, out of earshot, and sworn him to secrecy about her involvement in this--he and Lily had helped John pack, so they would have as many of the remaining hours as possible to themselves.

None of them spoke, afraid that their pain would overwhelm them if they did. So they just lay there, basking in each other's presence, holding on to each other for comfort--physically as well as mentally and emotionally--after hours filled with the softest caresses, silent moans and gasps, and incredible intensity.

Finally, inevitably, the timer on Matheson's chronometer went off, and he could feel his lovers stiffen, just as he did. He closed his eyes briefly, summoning the courage to do what he had to do, once again, feeling the mental reassurances from Luke and Lily before he broke the connection and slid out of their embrace, sitting up. Silently they dressed, and only then did John turn around to face his beloveds. "I can't keep doing this!" His voice almost broke at the words that forced their way out of his throat.

In a heartbeat, he found himself in their arms, feeling their pain as much as his own, but also their love and support.

"We can only hope that you really will find the cure," Lily whispered as she looked up at him, fighting back her tears. "We'll find a way, John. We will, because we have to."

John forced himself to smile at her and Luke, then leaned down to touch his forehead against Lily's, with Luke joining. He silently sent his love to them, then straightened up and reluctantly broke out of their embrace, walking toward the cradle to put the still-sleeping Faylinn and Dasha in their baskets, wanting to do this himself while he still could.

They left Lily's room silently.

They stood in a triangle before Alwyn's ship, trying to not break into tears. "I'll do anything I can to make sure that both Dureena and I will be here for the birth," Max told Ilas in a hoarse voice.

Ilas bravely smiled up at him. "I know."

They both looked at Dureena, and said simultaneously, "Are you sure?"

Dureena couldn't help but laugh, then looked at them earnestly. "Yes. This is the right decision."

Ilas drew her into as tight a hug as was possible with her swollen belly, then stepped back and smiled at the Zanderi, tears in her eyes. Dureena wiped them away as she smiled at her encouragingly. "Now, you promised--no tears. Remember?"

Ilas made an effort and drew herself up, nodding.

"God, I will miss you," Max whispered as he drew both women into his arms.

"We'll miss you, too," Dureena whispered back, fighting back tears herself now. No matter how much she wanted to go, no matter how much she wanted to be there for Max, she just couldn't bring herself to leave, not after all the support Ilas had given her in the time following the loss of her baby, and not when the shape-shifter needed support so much herself now.

They kissed Max one last time before he grabbed his bag, turned around, and walked away from them. He only turned briefly at the top of the ramp to smile back at them, then disappeared inside the dark womb of the ship.

Alwyn's ship had two small visitors' cabins and Sarah had agreed to share with Max, while Gideon and Matheson were bunking together. Gideon walked into the cabin to find John lying on one of the beds with his arm over his face. Gideon had spent the previous half-hour since they left Eriadne in the medical area of the ship with Alwyn and Sarah, ensuring that Lucas was adequately secured for the trip. He had no idea how Lucas might try to escape while they were in hyperspace and his paralysis prevented him moving anyway, but Gideon was taking no chances. Having finally assured himself that everything was secure, Alwyn had directed him to his cabin.

Looking around, Gideon decided that calling it a cabin was an exaggeration. A cubicle would have been a better term, but it was only for a couple of days and he and John had agreed that Max and Sarah

should take the larger room. The only pieces of furniture the cabin contained were two narrow bunks and a small cabinet. The bunks had a space about as wide again between them. That was it. There were no windows or portholes looking out into space, only a door leading to a tiny bathroom with basic hygiene facilities. Gideon saw that his bag had been placed on his bunk and thought about unpacking it, but as there was nowhere to put the contents, he decided he may as well live out of the bag for the next two days.

He turned and looked at Matheson again, who lay unmoving on the bunk, his arm still raised across his face. Gideon frowned and asked, "Are you OK?"

Matheson took his arm from his face, and Gideon could see that his eyes were red and his face tear stained. "No, not really." He looked up at Gideon and tried to smile, but failed completely. Gideon tried to think of something to say. He knew what the problem was; it was as hard for John to leave Lily and Luke as it had been for him to leave Deborah. There were no words of comfort that he could offer, no assurance that they would return soon, nothing that could make the separation easier.

The Captain sighed and admitted as much. "I wish there were something that I could say or do that would make it better, but there isn't. I guess we both just have to tough it out."

Matheson sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bunk, sitting forward and leaning his elbows on his knees. He stared at the floor as he said, "I don't think I can do that anymore, Matthew. I don't want to keep leaving them. It's worse now; there's even more of them to leave, two more people who I love yet can't be with. I want to be with my son and daughter; I don't want to spend months away from them. The children will grow up thinking that Lily and Luke are their parents and that I'm just some sort of visitor. I know that they'll do everything they can to stop that happening, but it's inevitable. I don't want that."

Gideon watched as Matheson lifted his head to look at him before he continued. "I think I have to resign from Earthforce, Matthew. I have to leave the Excalibur and be with my family."

Gideon sat down hard on the bunk opposite Matheson, the wind knocked out of him by those words. He'd never imagined that he would ever hear John say them. He burst out, "But Earthforce has been your dream! All your life you've wanted to be a part of it and the rules wouldn't let you. Now you've finally gained acceptance and status, and you've got a great career ahead of you, John. Can you really give all that up?" He watched as Matheson's head dropped again.

"I don't feel that I have much choice. I can't go on without them, Matthew. I can't live like this anymore, missing them every day, wanting to be with them, needing to be with them. I want to be a real father, not a part-time one." He looked up at Gideon, sitting opposite, "And don't tell me that you don't feel the same. Demon may be the empath, and I do my best to block, but I can tell how you feel about her and Marcus. You find it as hard to leave as I do."

This time it was Gideon who dropped his head to stare at the floor, swallowing hard as he thought of how Deborah had looked standing at the bottom of the ramp as it lifted. Marcus had awoken as they approached the ship, and she'd lifted him to her shoulder, holding him close. Their last embrace had held Marcus between them, and his last sight of them both was engraved on his heart and mind. When he got himself back under control, he looked up at Matheson and spoke.

"Yes. It was hard, but I'm going to find a way so we don't have to do it again. I don't know how, but I will find a way." He stood and paced in the limited area between the bunks, Matheson lifting his legs back onto his bed to give him room. "We're so damned close to finding that final piece of the puzzle,

and when we do, we can write our own tickets, John. Don't you see? We'll be heroes, the saviors of Earth. We'll be in a position to tell Earthforce what we want and make it stick. Don't throw that chance away. Give it a few weeks and see whether we're making progress, then decide. If the work that Alwyn and Sarah are planning doesn't pan out, then we know we're still in for the long haul and you can reassess your options. But if it does work, and we have a cure, then let's start thinking of what we want Earthforce to give us in return."

Gideon stopped pacing and looked down at Matheson. "The sky's the limit, John. Anything you want, that's the time to ask for it. If you want to be Captain of your own ship, they'll have to give it to you."

Matheson shook his head. "I don't want my own ship. I want to be with Luke and Lily and the babies."

Gideon put his hand on Matheson's shoulder, something he rarely did, knowing that physical contact made it harder to block thoughts, but this once he really wanted John to believe what he said. "I know, and we're going to find a way to make it happen. Just give me some time, OK? Don't rush into decisions that you'll have a lifetime to regret. Let's talk about this later, when we have a clearer idea of what our options are. Please? I don't want to lose the best First Officer I have ever had." He lightened his tone and smiled down at Matheson. "If you go, who's going to keep me on top of the paperwork?"

Matheson grinned up at him. "Well if you put it like that, I suppose I'll have to stay for a while, at least. Can you imagine how many reports we're going to have to fill in when we find the cure? Earthforce is going to want bulletins, memos, reports, returns, schedules--the works--all in triplicate, before they'll be willing to admit that we've completed our mission. If I leave you to do it, you'll still be trying to fill them all out when you come up for retirement. I'd hate to think of the entire population of Earth dying because Matthew Gideon can't tell his schedule S64D from his return 54437/HJ."

Gideon laughed out loud. "Then you had better stay on until you can straighten me out and satisfy the bureaucrats at home."

Matheson shook his head. "Not a chance. That would be a life sentence, and I want time off for good behavior."

They were both laughing as Gideon dropped back onto his bunk and opened his bag, taking out the cube that Deborah had given him and setting it on the small cabinet between the beds. He looked over at Matheson and said, "Deborah said that you'd gotten one of these too. I'll show you mine if you show me yours." He was grinning widely as he spoke.

Matheson laughed and pushed his hand under the pillow on his bunk, pulling out his cube. Gideon looked startled. "You weren't planning to try and sleep with that under there, were you? That could be damned uncomfortable."

Matheson laughed again. "No, but I didn't want to be far away from it." He looked up to see that Gideon's grin had turned into an understanding smile. He passed his cube over and said, "I helped Demon and Lily with the pictures on your cube this morning while you and Luke were out. I took the last three of Demon and Marcus myself. They're good, aren't they?"

Gideon spoke softly. "They're more than good, John. I hadn't realized that you'd taken them. Thank you. You captured Deborah perfectly." He grinned across the gap between the bunks. "And you even made Marcus look half way human. Have you ever seen such an ugly baby? How could such a beautiful mother give birth to that? Poor little bastard takes after my side of the family. Now, Dasha

is a great-looking kid." He looked down into the cube as he pressed each corner in turn. "And Faylinn is going to steal so many hearts, she's not going to know what to do with them."

Gideon looked across to where Matheson sat. John was smiling sadly. Gideon reached out and grasped Matheson's hand, closing it around the cube and holding it. "Hold onto this, John. Just hold onto the images and the memories, and we'll find a way to be with them."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn

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