

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

by [The Space Witches](#)

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



Dureena has to take a decision, and it isn't an easy one.

Chapter 1

Alwyn sat in his 'study' on his ship, going over the events of the last few days in his mind. He'd just returned from dinner in the castle, where only Max, Ilas, and Dureena had joined him and Sarah Chambers for the meal. Gideon had made a brief appearance at the end of the meal, joining them for coffee to get an update on the progress Lucas was making. Chambers had advised that Lucas should be fit to be moved the following evening, so Alwyn knew that he'd be leaving Eriadne the next day, taking Gideon, Matheson, Chambers and Eilerson with him, as well as their prisoner. He thought briefly about where he was going to put them all when they boarded and decided that he'd leave it to them to choose from the limited alternatives available. The Technomage then started to wonder how those being left behind would cope with losing their loved ones.

He'd become rather fond of Demon and Marcus in the short time he'd known them. Something about having been so closely involved in the baby's birth had created a bond between him and the tall blonde. Alwyn had spent what free time he'd had in the previous couple of days with her and Gideon, giving them some practical demonstrations on caring for a newborn baby. He smiled as he remembered their reactions to the first heavily soiled diaper. It was a close run thing, but Demon had just beaten Gideon out of the bedroom door into her living room, where the two of them had stood with mouths and noses covered, watching Alwyn dispose of the offending item. He'd been impressed by the turn of speed Demon had achieved, given it was less than twenty-four hours since the baby had been born. He'd laughed at them both and told them they'd better get used to it, there were lots more of those in store.

Alwyn smiled as he decided that they'd probably make rather good parents. They certainly wouldn't smother their son, but their real affection for the child showed through the banter and rude comments they made about him. He just wondered how Demon would manage when Gideon left. He was sure she'd cope with all the practical side of motherhood, and her sisters and Raven would be there to help her, but she so obviously adored Gideon that his departure would hurt her terribly. Alwyn sighed, remembering a time when he'd felt that way about someone. His partner had died many years before, but Alwyn still grieved for him.

His thoughts moved on to Raven, Lily and Matheson. He'd spent very little time with the tiny red-head or her telepath partner, but he'd got to know the doctor quite well during the previous few days and had learned to respect his intelligence and compassion as much as he did Chambers'. They had many similar qualities, and he was glad that Raven was again staying behind to be with Lily and her sisters.

Alwyn's contact with Max, Ilas and Dureena had been limited to meal times and he'd drawn few conclusions about the trio other than that they obviously had a strong affection for each other and would find it hard to part. That was certainly a common denominator between the three groupings.

Thinking of them in that way made him consider each of the 'witches' in turn. Despite what Galen thought, it was a poor description of them. Lily was certainly interested in the 'magical' aspects of the information the Vorlons had left behind, but she used her learning intuitively, having no knowledge of the science that lay behind it. Like many people who used technology, she didn't have to understand it, she just used it. Demon and Ilas were less interested than Lily, although they could also use the 'spells' the Vorlon had left, drawing on their link to Lily to enhance their knowledge.

It was that link that fascinated Alwyn. Akin to telepathy, but different, it operated on a different 'wavelength' to that used by true telepaths such as Matheson. The Technomage could detect it with his implants but could not listen in on their exchanges. It also seemed to operate at a different level than normal telepathy, sometimes almost merging the personalities of the three women, rather than just their thoughts. In creating these women, the Vorlons had certainly taken a step beyond anything the Shadows had achieved in that area. Alwyn could only feel relief that the Vorlons had been unable to control their tools. If the Vorlons had mastered these women, the sisters could have disrupted every Shadow vessel within light years of their location. The final battle could have ended in the defeat of the Shadows and the Vorlons taking control of the galaxy, instead of the departure of both races beyond the Rim, allowing for the expansion and evolution of the younger races.

Alwyn felt that his order and the rest of the galaxy had much to be grateful for in the stubborn resistance of the sisters, and one day he hoped to convince Galen of that fact. He sighed as he thought about the younger Technomage. Alienated from his friends by his own attitude and actions, Alwyn knew that Galen must be desperately lonely. The younger Mage was determined to protect his order regardless of the personal cost. Alwyn had long ago decided that the order didn't deserve such loyalty. They'd run from the fight to prevent themselves being used by the Shadows in the Great War. Rank cowardice in Alwyn's view. They should have stood up and fought their benefactors if they didn't want to be used. Or they could have helped Sheridan to fight both sides and expel the older races. Instead, they'd chosen to run and hide and didn't deserve the sacrifice that Galen was making for them.

Alwyn sighed softly. He wondered if he could ever convince Galen of that, but believed that he had to keep trying. He decided to contact the younger man, at least to tell him that Lucas was captured and his friends were safe.

"Ship, contact Galen." Alwyn sat back in his chair and waited for the connection to be made. Within a few moments, the space in front of him began to glow gently and Galen's face appeared in mid-air.

"Hello, Alwyn. How are you? Where are you?" He watched as Galen pushed the hood of his coat back from his face.

"Still on Eriadne. We've been having an interesting time these past couple of days. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin." He smiled at Galen as he described the discussions on the viral screen he'd had with Chambers and Raven, the progress they'd made, the capture of Lucas Buck, Angel's escape and the births that followed soon thereafter.

"I haven't had so much fun in years, Galen. There's something very satisfying about delivering babies. I do so enjoy making sure that the father suffers too." He smiled maliciously as Galen laughed.

"Don't tell me you pulled the birthing chair trick on poor Matthew. Where did you find one to put him in?"

Alwyn went on to describe the scene in detail, lingering on Gideon's discomfort when Demon swore at him and on their comments about how ugly their newborn child was. "Absolutely preposterous of course. Most beautiful looking child I've seen in years. He could hardly fail to be that though, considering he takes after his mother." He smiled fondly, gradually becoming aware that Galen had stopped laughing and was looking severe. "Oh come on, Galen. Demon and her sisters are all beautiful women without an ounce of evil or malice in them. Accept them for what they are, victims of the Vorlons, and move on. Your friend is in love with this so called witch, and you can either accept that or lose your friend."

He shook his head in exasperation and continued, "Your order threw you out for having too much contact with these people. Don't let your loyalty to that band of cowards divide you from your new home and family. For heaven's sake, tell Gideon what it is you've been hiding these last few months. He'll understand and take you back into the fold, I'm sure. Stop trying to protect those bastards and come clean!"

Galen shook his head sadly. "You know that I can't do that, Alwyn. I'm glad that you're able to help with the work on the viral screen and I'm happy that you were there to help Matthew and his... woman, when they needed it, but whatever my order has done to me, I cannot forget my loyalty to my teacher and to them. Thank you for letting me know that my friends are well. Just a couple of final questions. Was Angel hurt in the fight? When she escaped, was she well?"

Alwyn shook his head gently. "You have to get over that girl, Galen. She is completely fixated on Buck. Her sisters may have arranged her escape but I suspect that if there's a way, one day she'll find her way back to Lucas, whatever the personality inhabiting his body at the time. But she wasn't hurt and as far as I know, she was well when she left."

Galen nodded. "Thank you, Alwyn. Goodbye."

Alwyn sighed as the image faded in front of him and the glow died as the connection was severed.

Lily, John and Luke were trying hard to forget that this was their last night together. With all that had happened, the time they had spent together seemed to be much longer, yet somehow also much

shorter than the six or so days a calendar would have shown them.

In between feeding, changing diapers, putting the babies back to sleep--they had been happy to find out that Faylinn and Dasha were both heavy sleepers--the three of them had been making love almost relentlessly, making up for lost time, past and future. They had put the cradle with Faylinn and Dasha just inside the half-open door to Lily's walk-in wardrobe so their sleep wouldn't be disturbed by their parent's activities, but where they could hear the babies if they cried.

Some of the new variations her men had tried on her--everything except vaginal sex--still made Lily's juices flow when she thought about them now, lying cuddled against John and Luke during a brief respite. She closed her eyes as she remembered the most incredible sensations that had run through her body earlier that night. Her breasts had leaked milk when she'd become excited, and John and Luke had lapped it up, the sensations caused by the touch of their tongues on her tender breasts almost lifting her to the brink of orgasm. They had done that again and again, whenever she had leaked milk, delighting in her pleasure.

She opened her eyes to find John watching her. He was lying on his side, like her, but in the opposite direction, while Luke lay sideways, head resting on Lily's bent knees.

Lily started to smile at John, but the sad look in his eyes soon spread to hers. He didn't need to speak to let her know what was going on in his mind.

When Luke reached out and softly stroked his hair, John had to bite his lip hard so he wouldn't open his mouth and scream out his pain. He turned his head into the mattress and took a deep breath, covering his face with his left arm in an effort to control himself. Finally he lifted his arm and looked up again, touching Luke's and Lily's minds to bring them together. *[[I wish I could take you with me. All of you.]]* His eyes moved from Lily to Luke, then roamed towards the door to Lily's walk-in wardrobe, barely able to hold back the tears.

Luke closed his eyes and pressed his lips together as John's pain washed over him, intensifying his own.

The look Lily gave John seemed to burn right into his heart. *[[I wish we could come with you,]]* she 'whispered' with her mind-voice, her right hand reaching out to caress John's cheek.

When she withdrew her hand, her eyes suddenly lit up and for a few seconds she withdrew from mental contact. *[[Like putting someone who calls on hold,]]* John thought, 'hearing' Luke's wordless agreement.

Her eyes closed, then she smiled and opened them again. *[[Actually, there is a way for us to be with you. Kind of.]]*

John raised his eyebrows, intrigued. He assumed she'd 'talked' to one of her sisters when she had closed her eyes, but didn't have the slightest idea what she was talking about, and Luke looked just as clueless. *[[How?]]*

Lily grinned broadly and said out loud, "You'll see tomorrow morning, after we get back from our little expedition." Lily had asked John and Luke to join her in a simple after-birth ritual in the woods, and they had agreed to it.

She moved her face closer to John's and purred, "But now tell me again how much you'll miss me. Your

mouth expressed this so very skillfully earlier."

Max lay back in Ilas' bed, arms around the women lying on either side of him, thinking back on the events of the last few days. This visit to Eriadne had been as pleasurable as the first and considerably less traumatic than the second. He'd been pleased to see Dureena looking well again, and she'd certainly proved that she'd regained all her physical fitness. She'd proved it to the point where he was almost looking forward to returning to the Excalibur for a rest. Almost.

Ilas' pregnancy had not diminished either her passion or her ability to satisfy his and Dureena's desires. While the two women had enjoyed each other's company over the preceding months, they had quickly demonstrated their need and craving to have him as the third part of their relationship.

Their trip to the ruins had been uneventful and unproductive. They'd found no more items to enhance what Max already knew about the planet or its previous inhabitants, and he'd reluctantly reached the conclusion that Eriadne had given up everything it had to offer him in archaeological terms. It didn't seem likely that he would earn any more bonuses from his discoveries here, but that was OK, what he'd earned already was enough to keep him comfortably for the rest of his life. That didn't mean that he was planning on retirement, only that he could afford to relax a little, and Eriadne was now his favorite place to do that.

The problem was that if Max admitted that Eriadne was no longer a viable research site, what excuse would he have for coming back? And he had to come back. In another four months, Ilas' baby would be born and he needed to find a way to be with her. Could he rely on Gideon to find a way to get him back in time? The idea of relying on anyone was alien to Max. He'd always gone out and got what he wanted for himself, believing that everyone looked out for themselves and no one else, but his experiences on the Excalibur and Eriadne had gradually made him think that maybe this wasn't entirely true.

Gideon hadn't had to bring him along on this trip. He could have just taken off with Matheson, and Max would have been none the wiser. But the Captain hadn't done that, he'd brought Max along and as far as the linguist could tell, Gideon had gained nothing by doing so. In fact, he'd given Max a hold over him and Matheson, by allowing Max to know that they were AWOL, and Gideon had done it just because he knew that it was what Max, Dureena, and Ilas would want.

Max had struggled to find an ulterior motive for Gideon's action and had finally come to the conclusion that it had been motivated solely by concern for the well being of people he cared about, and those people included Max. The thought that the smart mouthed, sarcastic Captain of the Excalibur might actually be concerned about his welfare had been difficult for Max to accept, but when he'd talked about it to Dureena, she couldn't see why he found it so hard.

"He's always cared, Max. He doesn't say it and he doesn't always show it, but he cares about everyone on that ship and will do whatever he can for them. Why does that surprise you so much?" She'd looked up at Max, puzzled. It was a good question. After nearly two and a half years working with Gideon, he should have known better by now. [I must be getting old. It never used to take me so long to recognize when something was staring me in the face.]

So yes, he probably could rely on Gideon to do his best to get Max back to Eriadne in time for the birth of Ilas' baby, but while he could trust Gideon to try, could Max trust him to succeed? Ilas' sisters had been lucky to have Gideon and Matheson present when their babies were born, Max was determined that Ilas should have the same as her sisters. She *wouldn't* be alone for the birth.

If Max couldn't guarantee that he would be there, he had to be sure of the next best thing. He had to be sure that Dureena would stay with Ilas, but that could be tricky. He knew that Dureena had been getting restless. As her health had recovered from the loss of her baby, she'd found it impossible to rest and relax on Eriadne and had gradually got more involved in the daily activities of the castle and village. As far as Eilerson could tell she now led most of the hunting expeditions, mostly to relieve her restlessness and boredom. He smiled to himself. [This place must be hell for a thief. How can you steal anything when everything is freely given?]

Max had wondered whether he could stay with Ilas and let Dureena go back to the Excalibur with the others. Two problems came to mind. First, if the work that Alwyn and Chambers were planning was unsuccessful, they'd still need a xenoarcheologist on the Excalibur. Second, how the hell would they explain how Max had disappeared and Dureena reappeared, during a supposedly secret mission for President Sheridan? They might just get away with Dureena returning to the Excalibur at this point, but if Max stayed behind, there was a huge risk that the whole façade they'd built to cover this trip would crumble. Gideon and Matheson could end up being court-martialed and Max's chances of ever returning to Eriadne would be gone completely. Eilerson stopped his thoughts dead in their tracks at that point. Was that his only reason for not wanting Gideon and Matheson court-martialed? He decided that it wasn't. Just for once he wasn't being driven entirely by self-interest.

So much as Max hated being alone, and missed Ilas and Dureena every hour of every day, he somehow had to convince Dureena to stay behind and be there for Ilas, just in case he couldn't be.

He took a deep breath and hugged both women to his sides. "We need to talk."

Ilas listened in dismay as Max told Dureena that he wanted her to stay on Eriadne. She knew how restless Dureena had become and much as she loved the thief and wanted her company, Ilas didn't think it right to ask her to stay. She also knew how lonely Max was with both of them away from him.

Dureena had told her how Max had nearly worked himself to death after his first visit to Eriadne, he'd missed her so much. Ilas could see that he'd been driving himself relentlessly since his last visit, using his work to help him ignore how lonely he was without them. Ilas couldn't bear the thought of him being that lonely and she hated to see him look as tired and drawn as he had when he arrived. After the last few days with her and Dureena he looked relaxed and years younger and Ilas wanted him to stay that way. If the price to be paid for that was Dureena leaving her to go with Max then so be it. That was a price she was willing to pay.

Ilas swallowed hard, fighting to bury the pain that the thought of being without them both caused her. It would be hard to be alone again now. She told herself sternly that she wouldn't be alone, that she still had her sisters, but it was no longer enough. She'd learned a different kind of love than that she felt for her sisters and they felt for her. The love of and for her sisters was still the foundation on which Ilas' life was built, but she now knew how much more love had to offer. The thought of being without either of the people who made her feel that way was agony, but if that was what they needed, that was what she should do. Ilas waited until Max had finished his eloquent rationale of why Dureena should stay behind and responded with a single word.

"No."

Dureena and Max both turned to her in surprise. It was a word she didn't often use, but when she did, she meant it.

"Dureena must go back with you, Max. She's not happy here any more, and you're not happy on your own. You need each other. I'll be fine. My sisters will be here for me, and I know that you'll find a way to get back in time for the birth. So I don't need Dureena to stay with me." Ilas tried her best to keep the quiver out of her voice but knew that she hadn't been entirely successful when Max leaned toward her and kissed her gently.

"Liar," he whispered. "Nice try, Ilas, but you're not fooling anyone. You need Dureena here a damned sight more than I need her on the Excalibur. I have my work and my colleagues. I'll be fine on my own."

Ilas reached up and stroked his face. "Oh, Max, now who's lying? You know that's not true." She was gazing up lovingly into his eyes when her attention was drawn by a cough from the foot of the bed.

She turned to see Dureena standing there, fully dressed, hand on hips, her face showing her fury. "Would either of you care to know what I think? Or what I want? You've both been so busy being noble and self-sacrificing that you seem to have forgotten that I might have an opinion on this."

Ilas was mortified. "Oh Dureena, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. Of course it matters what you want. That's the most important thing of all. So tell us, what do *you* want to do?"

She watched as Dureena's face changed. The fury drained away to be replaced by anguish. "I don't know! I want to be with you both, but I can't be. And I don't know how to decide."

Ilas moved off the bed and rushed toward Dureena, but found herself held at arms length. "No, don't! I need to think this through. I need some time to myself."

Ilas stepped back and leaned against Max, who had come to stand behind her. They both watched in distress as Dureena flung herself out of the room. Ilas turned in Max's arms and rested her head against his chest. "I only wanted what was best for you both, Max. I thought that you should be together."

Max held her tightly and leaned down to kiss her. "I know you did, but Dureena will have to decide for herself. She knows that we both love her and want her, she'll just have to decide where she needs to be most." He lifted her chin with his hand to smile down into her eyes. "Now we only have a few hours, so come back to bed and show me how much you'll miss me when I'm gone."

Dureena all but ran through corridors and up staircases, half blinded by the tears that were rising in her eyes. She burst through a door and found herself on the castle's battlements, looking out into the star-filled night sky, panting. Any other night she would have lain down and enjoyed the stars and the small moons slowly sweeping by above her, but tonight she didn't see the beauty. She just stood there, hands clenched into fists, tears running down her cheeks unnoticed, while her heart was being torn in two. [How can I not go? This isn't a place I can stay for a long time. Everybody here has noticed my restlessness lately. I need to *move* again, and Max may not have looked as bad as he did after leaving Eriadne the first time, but he must have buried himself in his work again to cover the feeling of loneliness. He needs me, and I want to be with him.]

With a few quick steps she reached the battlements proper, and beat her fist on the stone, letting her

head fall forward. [But how can I not stay? I want to be with Ilas at the birth.] She felt a pang of pain. [It's terribly selfish, but somehow I believe that by being present at the birth of Ilas' child, it will be as if my own child is given back to me. I can be a mother for the baby from the very first moment, like Ilas, and not just be some woman who happens to live with them.]

Dureena raised her head, looking out over the moonlit landscape for a long while. [But it's not just this. Ilas needs someone. She may not say it, but she's very afraid that she'll have to give birth all alone. Yes, her sisters are here but that just isn't the same as having your partner present at the birth.]

Birth. She still felt a pang of pain as she remembered her baby. Dureena's mind rushed back to when Ilas had told her about Angel's escape, and that she, Demon and Lily had helped her. Dureena had exploded into a blinding rage. Max had barely been able to restrain her as she'd tried to fling herself at Ilas, who'd just stood there and looked at her with wide eyes full of tears, listening to her cursing. When Dureena had finally run out of breath, Ilas had whispered, "I'm sorry, Dureena. You know I wouldn't ever hurt you, but we didn't have a choice. If Angel had been found guilty and mind-wiped... we couldn't let that happen to our sister. She didn't know the price that would have to be paid for Lucas' return, or she'd never have brought him back! If you had been in our place and believed your sister was innocent, wouldn't you have done the same?"

[Innocent, right! She was so desperate for Lucas to come back that she probably would have done anything to make it happen!] Dureena felt a bitter taste in her mouth as the cold rage threatened to rise again and swallowed in an effort to quell it. [But her sisters truly believe that Angel didn't know what she'd been doing, otherwise Ilas would never have conspired with them to help her escape. And it isn't over yet. Gideon promised to get the ones who killed my baby, and he always keeps his promises.] Dureena sighed, rage turning into sadness as her mind returned to the present and the decision she had to make. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. [Forgive me, my love...]

They had risen well before sunrise, and after Lily had fed the babies, they had left the castle for the woods. Luke and John had carried sleeping Faylinn and Dasha in baskets, covered with warm blankets to shelter them from the pre-dawn cool. Lily was wrapped in a shawl, and a bag hung over her shoulder, containing everything they would need.

Silently, they followed the path winding through the trees. It was still some time before sunrise when they arrived at their destination: the bat tree. For once, Devi didn't come to greet them--was she still out hunting for food, or did she sense that the small group gathering at the foot of the tree hadn't come to see her this once?

Luke and John gently put down the baskets, while Lily took off the bag and squatted down to lay out its contents beside her: a bottle of water, three flat, thin stone plates, each about the size of her hand, a thick candle and matches, a pure white feather, and finally a cloth-covered earthenware bowl, which she handled very carefully, respectfully.

She sat back on her heels, signaling John and Luke to join her and link hands. "Sit," she said in a low voice, then closed her eyes and breathed deeply, her lips moving as she formed silent words. Then she opened her eyes again and let go of her men's hands, reaching out for the stone plates and handing one each to John and Luke. Using them as shovels, they silently started digging a hole between the roots of the tree. When it was deep enough, they put the stone plates aside, and on Lily's signal Luke took the candle and lit it, then carefully put it on the ground at the edge of the hole. John then took the feather and let it glide down into the hole.

When it had touched ground, Lily uncovered the earthenware bowl and took the dried placentas of her children out with both hands. She held them for a moment, remembering the surprisingly pleasant--almost orgasmic--sensations she had felt when she had expelled them. John and Luke had cut the cords after they had stopped pulsing, and for a short while they had just watched their sleeping babies, then finally she'd let Luke and John take them to wash and wrap in warm blankets while she'd lain in the bed next to them. She had fallen asleep holding these two tiny, warm bundles in her arms, her men sitting either side of her bed.

Lily looked up from her memories and smiled at her men, then placed the placentas into the hole with a ritual gesture. When she spoke, it was almost as if the giant tree leaned down to listen. "You have nourished and sustained us, Mother, throughout our lives. We give this gift to You, to nourish and sustain You as it did our children. May You bless them as You blessed us."

She bent her head respectfully, then continued, looking at the tree, "May this gift also nourish and sustain You, my friend, as You nourished and sustained my soul so often." She again bent her head respectfully. Then she took a handful of earth and let it fall into the hole, John and Luke doing the same. They filled the hole in silence, and when they were done, patted the earth with their hands. Lily took the bottle of water and poured it over John's and Luke's hands, then over her own to wash off the earth, but at the same time as a last offering, letting it fall onto the now closed hole. They joined hands again, and Lily murmured silent words, then opened the circle by pulling back her hands and blowing out the candle.

When she had put the bottle, candle and matches back into the bag, they got up and Lily drew her men into a hug, then stood back and said, "Thank you. I know you don't share my beliefs, so your coming with me and joining in this little ritual means all the more to me."

John smiled. "It was wonderful."

Luke squeezed Lily's hand and smiled at her in unspoken agreement with John.

At that moment they heard the sound of wings flapping, and when Lily held out her arm, Devi, the bat, attached her feet to it and hung head down, looking around with her big dark eyes. "Devi! How nice of you to welcome us!" Lily smiled as John and Luke greeted the bat, then turned towards the baskets. "I'm sure you came to see my young, didn't you? You've always been such a curious thing." She held her over Faylinn's and then Dasha's basket, steadying her arm with the other hand--holding Devi for any length of time like this was quite demanding. Lily smiled as she watched the bat sniff towards her children, then, her curiosity satisfied, pushed herself off her arm and with a few flaps of her wings flew towards John, attaching herself to his arm, then with agile movements clawing her way up his chest, head up. Out of a reflex he lightly closed his arms around her, cradling her against his chest the way Lily had shown him on his previous visit, as the bat sniffed at him. Her eyes seemed to bore into his for a few seconds, then suddenly she expanded her wings and launched herself into the air, rising towards her sleeping place in the top of the tree.

John looked after her, totally perplexed by her behavior.

Lily had her hands clasped before her breast and smiled at him. "It seems Devi wanted to say goodbye."

John looked at her, then at Luke, who only shook his head, unable to come up with another explanation.

Lily took their hands in hers and squeezed them, looking at them lovingly. "Let's go. I want to greet the rising sun."

They arrived on top of the hill a few minutes before sunrise. It was getting light very fast, and soon they could see the first rays of light emerge from over the horizon. They stood there silently, watching the spectacular sunrise, each of them deep in thought.

Lily felt a melody rise in her throat and stepped forward, chanting words in a tongue that had surfaced from somewhere deep inside her, greeting the rising sun, thanking Mother Nature for all that she had been given, and at the same time offering all her pain about again having to part with John to Her to take care of. Spreading her arms slightly, she felt energy flow into her, from the earth and from the rising sun, strengthening her, as she repeated the chant several times.

John was unable to tear his eyes off her, the expression on her face rapturous. He was so captivated that he didn't notice the tears running down his own face.

When Lily started chanting, Luke had to close his eyes as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. When he opened them again, it seemed as if Lily had a halo around her head where the sunlight played in her hair. [Almost unearthly.]

The chant ended with rhythmic humming, and finally Lily's voice ebbed while the sun separated itself from the horizon. Taking a deep breath and one last look at the sun, Lily turned around to look at John, feeling her heart ache as she saw the traces of tears on his face. She opened her arms and rushed up to him at the same time as Luke, and John leaned into their embrace, hugging them tightly, eagerly accepting and returning the kisses and caresses that were offered to him.

Gideon lay on his back staring at the ceiling, his hands clasped firmly behind his head, desperately trying to ignore the erection he'd woken with. The previous two days had been a heady mixture of heaven and hell, and he hated the fact that he would be leaving in a few hours time, but Chambers had told them at dinner the previous night that Lucas should be fit to move sometime later today. She planned to bring him out of the sedation she'd been keeping him under, and Alwyn would take the Excalibur people and Lucas away that evening.

Thinking back over the previous couple of days, Gideon considered the good points. The time he'd been able to spend with Deborah and Marcus, watching them, holding Marcus, learning things about babies that he wasn't really sure that he wanted to know. He'd arrived at the conclusion that all they did was eat, sleep, cry and emit noxious substances from every orifice. Gideon knew that his leather jacket would never be the same since he'd made the mistake of not putting a towel over his shoulder when burping Marcus. And he now knew how to change a diaper, but he also knew that he'd much rather not if he could avoid it. He grinned to himself. He could see the advantages of being a part time father. [Sorry, darling. I can't change the diaper right now, I have to go and save Earth. Catch up with you later.]

Then there were the bad parts. Luke had come to him this time, to give Gideon advice before he asked for it. That advice had been clear. No sex. Luke had told him that Deborah probably wouldn't be interested anyway, being sore as hell, but even if she were, the answer should be 'no'. It was inadvisable

for at least a couple of weeks after the birth. So Gideon had taken Deborah back to their rooms and made sure he didn't touch her in any way that was likely to arouse either of them. He tried not to look at her when she was naked or feeding the baby, as he knew that just the sight of her was enough to excite him. The worst part was sleeping with her, feeling her body inches away, and not daring to touch her. He'd carefully rolled on his side, his back turned to her, making sure that she didn't realize the effort it cost him to follow Luke's rules. Even so, Gideon awoke with an erection that could poke holes through armor plating. He lay still, trying to think of things that would get rid of it and failing miserably.

He became aware that the pattern of Deborah's breathing had changed and he looked over at her, lying curled up, her back to him. The covers had fallen off her again, and her back was naked to the hips. He could see the curve of her spine and the cleft of her buttocks, the way her waist narrowed and the swell of her hip. Gideon bit his lip as he felt himself stiffening further at the sight. [Drakh, Drazi, Pak'ma'ra. Imagine fucking one of them, Matt. That'll bring you down.] But it wasn't working. Then he realized that her breathing was coming in gasps, interspersed with occasional very quiet sniffs. Deborah was crying.

Gideon rolled onto his side and put his hand on her shoulder, pulling her over onto her back. Deborah's face was wet and her eyes enormous as she gazed up at him. "What's the matter?" He couldn't stop himself reaching out to wipe the tears from her cheek.

"Why won't you look at me or touch me any more? Don't you want me? Is it different now that I've had the baby?" Her voice was cracking as she spoke.

His resistance broke completely. Gideon pulled Deborah towards him and wrapped his arms around her, letting her feel how aroused he was. He held her close and kissed every part of her he could reach, finally settling on her mouth and kissing her deep and long. When he eventually pulled away he smiled at her and spoke. "Does that answer you?" He explained what Luke had told him and how difficult it had been to follow that advice, how only by not looking at her or touching her, had he been able to control his desire for her.

Deborah reached up to stroke his face. "You are an idiot, you know." She grinned at the startled expression on Gideon's face. "What Luke said is true. I'm really not interested in vaginal sex at the moment. I'm still sore and it wouldn't be a good idea anyway, but that isn't the only way we can make love. There are lots of other things we can do, and I have every intention of doing one of those things right now. Just don't expect me to say much for a while. I don't like to talk with my mouth full."

Gideon rolled onto his back and groaned as he felt her lips enclose the head of his cock and her tongue flicking over and around it.

When they entered the castle keep Lily said, "You go on with Faylinn and Dasha, I'll follow in a minute." Without further explanation, she disappeared around a corner and was gone.

John shrugged when Luke looked at him questioningly. "Don't ask me."

"I didn't." Luke gave him a soft grin and ruffled his hair, then they proceeded to their rooms.

They had barely sat down in Lily's easy chairs, cradling their babies in their arms, when Lily caught up with them. Faylinn and Dasha had awoken on the way home, and Lily felt through the link that they were hungry. "Hungry again my darlings? You seem to be insatiable, like your fathers." She grinned lasciviously as she put the items she had brought with her on the table and sat down in a chair between Luke and John, then opened the front of her dress and took Faylinn from John, then Dasha from Luke, putting them to her breasts. She smiled as they started sucking vigorously.

John took one of the items she had brought with her from the table and looked at it curiously. It was a cube, made of some strange, murky, grayish colored material.

"What is this?" he asked, looking at Lily curiously.

There was another cube on the table, and something rectangular a bit bigger than Luke's hand and about as thick as his finger. When he took it in his hand it came to life, the flat side facing him showing a picture of the table and the remaining cube, as clear as if he was looking through a window. He looked up at Lily, waiting for her explanation.

She smiled. "It's something like a 3-D camera. And those," she nodded towards the cube John held in his hand and the one on the table, "you could call 3-D photo albums, I guess. They hold eight pictures each."

John just looked at her, finally understanding what Lily had meant the night before when she had said, *[[Actually, there is a way for us to be with you. Kind of.]]*

"And why two cubes?" Luke asked, already guessing the answer.

"Demon wants to make one for Gideon too, but it has to be a surprise for him. She'll join us after he's left for the meeting."

Luke examined the camera more closely. On the left and right sides, several buttons had appeared--or rather the images of buttons, like on a touch screen. "So how do they work?" he asked.

"The button on the bottom right is for zooming, top right for taking a picture. On the left, you flip through them back and forth, chose the ones you want to keep, and transfer them to the cube."

Luke lifted the camera and zoomed out so it showed Lily with Faylinn and Dasha in her arms, feeding at her breasts. "Like this?" he asked and pushed the button on the top right. The image froze, and he showed it to John, who gasped when he saw how realistic it was.

Lily grinned. "Apparently you did it right."

Lily had just taken a picture of Luke and John with their sleeping babies in their arms when Kirrin knocked on the door, bringing lucky charms for the babies. Kirrin's daughter, Thikira, had made them from clay in the form of three moons, with ribbons to hang them above their cradles, "So the babies are never in the dark," her mother told Lily, John and Luke with a smile. "She was too shy bring them herself, but I'm sure she won't be able to stay away from the babies for long. She's too curious."

"Please tell Thikira we thank her very much," Lily said, very moved, "And I'll give Demon the charm for Marcus."

"That would be nice, thank you." Kirrin nodded and went to leave but Lily stopped her, saying, "Could you do me a favor, Kirrin?"

Kirrin looked at her curiously. "Sure."

Lily handed her the Vorlon camera. "Could you take a picture of all of us together, for John to take with him?"

Kirrin smiled her understanding. "Of course I will. Just tell me what to do."

All had agreed that they wanted to share their last breakfast together, despite the tight schedule of the day. Everybody made an effort to be cheerful, and everybody laughed at the stories Alwyn told of his adventures, but the atmosphere was still noticeably subdued compared to the usual gatherings in the dining room.

Lily and Demon had put the baskets with their babies on a table, and every once in a while one of the others would walk up to them and gently stroke their heads, or put a finger to their tiny hands, smiling when the babies reflexively grabbed it. It was as if the adults were drawn to them, as if the newborns could bring them hope.

When Gideon, Chambers, Raven and Alwyn had excused themselves and left, the ones left behind sat silently for a few seconds, eyes lowered, all too aware of time slipping away.

Then Demon looked up at the sound of Marcus' cry, forcing a smile onto her face. "Please excuse me, someone is demanding that the milk bar is opened, and just like his father, he expects his orders to be followed promptly." She got up and took the basket, closing her eyes briefly when she bent over it and her loose hair fell over her face. *[[I'll join you soon. There's something I have to do first.]]*

Lily acknowledged her silently, studying Demon's back as she left.

Demon was smiling to herself as she finished feeding Marcus. One of these days she and Matthew would learn to talk to each other about things that were bothering them, but she doubted that it would be soon. They were both so used to acting independently and taking responsibility, that sharing was an effort, but the best thing about their misunderstandings was making up afterwards. Gideon had reluctantly left her after breakfast to go to a meeting on Alwyn's ship with Sarah, Luke and Alwyn, where they planned to brief him on the progress they were making on the viral screen. It would be the last time they'd have chance to talk with Luke there, so Matthew had dragged himself away and down to the ship.

This gave Demon the chance to do something that she knew Gideon would never have approved, but which her conscience drove her to do. Pulling her dress back together she picked up Marcus and walked to the infirmary. She smiled at the two guards outside Lucas' room and dismissed the two guards posted inside. Demon sat in the chair by the side of the bed, holding Marcus asleep in her arms, and waited.

While they waited for Demon, John took a few pictures of the sleeping Faylinn and Dasha, then turned to Lily who was sitting on the window seat playing her harp, and took a picture while she was looking out the window. She turned towards him quickly, shaking her head and grinning.

John felt as if a knife was twisting in his heart, and for a moment he thought he couldn't do it again--leave Eriadne, leave the ones he loved behind, not knowing when he'd be able to come back.

As if she'd read his mind, Lily smiled at him warmly, conveying all her love, her hope and trust--in him and in life.

And somehow his pain subsided, just a little. [I'll think of something. There has to be a way.]

{Chapter 1} {Chapter 2} {Epilogue}

The Witches of Eriadne: Fire Burn

{Part 1: Past} {Part 2: Present} {Part 3: Present Perfect} {Part 4: Future} {Part 5: Conditional}