

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four I - Part 1: The Spirit of the Outfield

by [Mistress Sarah](#) and [The Space Witches](#)



Alwyn is always good for a little surprise--or two, or three.

Chapter 1

January 2271

Alwyn

Ishtar had picked a truly terrible time to go into heat. Spare me the dissertations on Dragon mating, you may claim that Ishtar had no control over what she was doing, but I've known her for years. She was getting her revenge for having to stay in my ship when Lily had her baby.

Hell hath no fury like a female dragon scorned.

Sarah and I were back on the Excalibur, 'oohing' and 'aahing' over the new baby, participating in a charming blessing ritual Lily had created, and inspecting the other children, when suddenly I felt rather... warm, which was not part of my grandfatherly image I was trying to project. If anyone had read my mind at that time, they would have locked the kiddies up, hidden the women and sent me on

my way. Ishtar was safely tucked away on my ship, as I had refused to allow her off the vessel. She had been rather vocal and upset with me, but I had finally ordered her to stay on the ship. She'd been cycling irregularly in the last few millennia and I didn't want a lusty dragon onboard the Excalibur, or else there might be even more children in the crèche in a few months time.

Dragon-lust can have that effect on people, I've noticed. Technomages included.

Sarah and I had arrived on the Excalibur just in time for the birth of Lily's third child, and for Sarah to perform the operation that was needed to save the little girl's life. We had returned to our own ship very soon after, as I'd sensed that Ishtar might be coming into heat. I had spent the last couple of days trying to calm Ishtar down, but all attempts had failed, so now the plan was put on the doddering, feeble, Alwyn the grandfatherly Technomage act, tweak Gideon's nose--or ear in this case--and get the hell out of there. Then I'd drop Sarah off on Terra and go to a certain planet that apparently only I knew about, where Ishtar could mate with the male dragon of her choice.

I ignored the warmth that was spreading through my body; instead I worked on charming Lily into letting me hold her baby. When she was nestled in my arms, I gave her an appraising look, and then I noticed that Gideon looked uneasy about something. I looked sharply at Luke, John, Lily, and then at Matthew. Matthew saw the question in my eyes, and suddenly looked away. It's amazing that he ever wins at poker, as his emotions are rather obvious to the highly trained observer. Well, to this highly trained observer, anyway.

Mental Note: bring some poker cards when I next visit the Excalibur.

Sharpening the focus of my eyes considerably, I was able to see the baby's father's characteristics hidden beneath Lily's red hair and pale skin. If anybody had asked me, I could have answered that particular unspoken question, but nobody did. It's a shame, really. I could have saved Gideon countless sleepless nights with an easy 'yes' or 'no' answer, but he was too proud to ask. Or perhaps, too afraid

I gave the baby back to Lily, and then whispered to Sarah that I had to leave immediately. My senses were growing more acute with Dragon-lust, and I abruptly felt overwhelmed by the fertility in the room and the urge to procreate.

Sarah drew closer, and I had to step back. I could tell that she was close to ovulating, and while the two of us had already discussed having children early on in our relationship, we had decided the time wasn't right. For now the two of us--OK, three of us--were going to enjoy our new relationship together, and so we had. We had kept it secret for the most part, until on our last visit, Gideon had wedged the landing bay doors to prevent us from leaving. I had noticed that rather quickly, as had Galen. I had given a gesture to Galen which translated into, 'He's being cute. As he's obviously up to something, let's play along, instead of disintegrating the door, OK?'

That night I had gone to Sarah's quarters and seduced her repeatedly, in the back of my mind waiting for Gideon to show up. Ishtar had pretended to sleep, complete with a fake snore, and I'd been on full alert for when Gideon had barged in. It had been difficult not to laugh as Gideon had quickly realized that I was 'furious', and that he was in over his head. I wasn't really furious. After all, I had done it to him several times, but I wanted to scare him into not telling everyone about my relationship with Sarah. No, instead I wanted him to divulge it to just one person, and perhaps her approval would ease Sarah's fears about revealing our relationship to her friends.

I had purposely let the real Alwyn appear to Gideon for just a moment, as a sign that my control was slipping badly, and that was what had scared the hell out of him. Sarah had wanted to keep our

relationship quiet for now, as she didn't truly trust the cessation of hostilities between Galen and the rest of the crew. Due to Galen's training by Elric, the younger man was rather parochial at times, especially with regards to the Vorlons, which had caused significant tensions between the Mage, the Witches and their partners. Sarah was quite worried about how her former crewmates' wives would react to her being involved with a Shadow-spawn Technomage. Knowing Gideon as well as I did, I knew that he'd immediately tell an empathic Demon, who'd probably pick up the reason for Sarah's discomfort.

I think Demon liked and approved of me, as I had tried my hardest to appeal to her, and well, I've been told by Sarah that I can be very charming when I want to be.

Gideon had been remarkably discrete, telling only his wife, who had told her sisters, who hadn't told their partners. They were quite smart, and had picked up Sarah's unease about them knowing of our involvement. All three sisters had welcomed me warmly on the ship when we arrived to help with the arrival of the new baby, and I was content that they at least approved of my relationship with Sarah.

But now, I really had to leave.

[Mate with her,] Ishtar kept sending to me, which I kept ignoring. We had years to decide when it was the right time, and I didn't want it happening just because of some lusty, randy dragon familiar of mine. Sarah had to want it too. There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted it, even before the Dragon-lust.

"Why? We just got back here?" Sarah teased.

"Ishtar." I was short as I told her that, and her eyebrow raised slightly. She was amused, and I wanted nothing more than to nip her on her long, delicate neck, marking her as my own.

[ISHTAR! She's *not* a dragon! She doesn't think that's *foreplay*! STOP IT!] My protestations to Ishtar fell on deaf ears, as Ishtar wanted to bluntly fuck, fuck, fuck. Her urges were playing havoc with me, as my body was beginning to respond to Sarah's nearness.

"Is she..?"

"Very much so." I looked at Sarah, and unexpectedly I saw her pregnant with our child, with a very large bulge and swollen breasts. There was a warmth in my belly that swiftly went south, and I wanted to mate with her, here, right now, to sire on her.

Blessed Electrons. Mate? MATE? Mating? No, I wanted to make love with her, not mate. Siring? I wasn't a fucking stallion, and she wasn't a brood mare.

[ISHTAR!]

[Mate with HER! She is ready. She is ripe.]

Ishtar was normally a wonderful conversationalist, but right now she was broadcasting lust on a high band frequency. I looked over at Demon and Matheson, knowing that as an empath and telepath respectively, they would be most vulnerable to Ishtar's sendings. I saw Demon begin to shift slightly and realized that she was starting to pick up Ishtar's signals. She was going to grab Gideon any minute now. Wonderful, a belated party for the new baby's arrival was going to turn into a wild orgy due to a dragon that was in full rut. John Matheson was drinking a lot of ice water, and he appeared

distracted. It was obviously long past time for me to leave.

Sarah drew closer, and she noticed that I stepped back again.

[MATE. DESIRE. LUST.]

"What's the problem?"

"I can smell that you're... about to ovulate."

[Ready for you. It is time. It is natural to have young ones. Why do you wait so long?]

"That's never bothered you before." She teased me.

"I've never noticed it before. It's rather... noticeable when you've got a very vocal dragon nearby who wants to procreate."

[MATE!]

"Is she giving you ideas about me?" Sarah looked at me, and I suddenly realized that her eyes were bright with Dragon-lust. Ishtar was obviously affecting the both of us, and in the background, I could hear John commenting on his new child's startling red hair. He still appeared to be somewhat distracted, as the less charitable would say that he was babbling like a brook, and I began walking toward the door. Sarah followed me, and I noticed again the swelling of her breasts, the nipples that I longed to suckle.

[ISHTAR! STOP THIS IMMEDIATELY!]

"Like what?" Sarah touched my hand, and I suddenly realized that she was too damned close. She was on the cusp of her fertility, and...

[ISHTAR!]

I just shook my head, and Sarah grinned delightedly. "You? Embarrassed? You? An almighty Technomage? Well, I can assure you that I'm ready, if you are."

We disappeared quickly after that. It was for the good of the ship, after all. Else a fornication rite that would have made Bacchus proud would soon upstage the newest arrival.

Matthew Gideon

"Has anyone seen Sarah? Or Alwyn?" John asked. "They were having a conversation in the corner, and then the next minute they were gone." For some reason, John appeared rather flustered, as he was sweating.

"Nope. But maybe the Technomage Transport Service had to drop her back on Terra rather quickly," I answered.

Sarah Chambers

We tried to return to Alwyn's ship as quickly as two people deeply in lust could move, but we couldn't move quickly enough. Ishtar's urges were sweeping us away on a flood tide of desire, and the moment we were alone on the bullet car, we lost control.

Alwyn gestured at the security cameras and they screeched, showers of sparks and smoke spiraling into the air. Then I felt the car accelerate beneath us, at the same time as my clothes seemed to disintegrate. It was going to be a wild ride in the bullet car, unlike any in the history of the Excalibur.

The details blur in my mind, but moments of memory remain. How Alwyn's hands and mouth moved over my body, lingering on my nipples, my navel and my labia. How his fingers moved inside me, while his tongue and lips lifted to me to glorious climax by pleasuring my clit. How we seemed to float in mid air as I took his swollen cock deep into my mouth and throat, while he reached his tongue deeper inside me than I would have thought possible. And how every touch ignited a new fire of passion, creating sparks of electricity that burned holes in the walls of the bullet car as it careered around the Excalibur.

We fucked the length and breadth of that ship, from top to bottom and from side to side. Never has its phallic shape been so appropriate as it was that day. Alwyn and I screamed like dragons when we climaxed, and then we were back to savagely fucking without missing a beat.

I knew the moment I conceived, as Alwyn screamed his joy loudly when it occurred. For a moment, I thought I was a dragon flying on the currents of a lost world with my mate rutting behind me, screaming out our cries of lust and joy, but then I realized I was in the bullet car.

He began to laugh in delight, and I had to join him for a brief moment, before Ishtar's lust overwhelmed us again.

Matthew Gideon

Soon after Alwyn and Sarah had left Medbay, Deborah sidled up to me. She started to nibble on my earlobe and whispered, "Do you have to go back to work yet? Come back with me for an hour."

I looked around at her face and could see that her eyes were dark with desire. She was breathing heavily, and when I glanced down, I could see that her nipples were hard beneath her black T-shirt. I had no idea what had got her into that state, but I knew that if I didn't get her inside our shielded quarters, she'd start sending her lust right around the ship. Before I knew it, I'd have a ship full of people screwing anything that moved and a fair number of things that didn't. As we left, I noticed that John was grinning at Lily and Luke, and the sparkle in his eye had nothing to do with the joys of fatherhood.

As soon as we reached the bullet car, Deborah pounced. She was all over me, and I was trying to calm her down, but by now she was projecting pure, unadulterated lust, loud and clear. I didn't know what was causing it, but I knew damn well that everyone on the ship was going to be feeling it, and there was nothing I could do, other than get her inside our quarters as fast as possible.

I dragged her off the bullet car while I still had some shreds of clothing and dignity intact, but lost control myself as we entered our rooms to the sound of shredding cloth. Then I entered her, hard, to the

sound of us both screaming with passion and desire.

It was a damned sight longer than an hour before I crawled back to the bridge, and John was *really* late for his next shift.

April 2271

Sarah Chambers

"Sarah." His voice was slightly muffled, as he was busy kissing my stomach.

"Alwyn." I giggled.

"Do you think it's quite... the right thing to do? I mean, we're just going to show up for an unplanned visit, after inviting Max and his women to join us, then announce that we're here, and well..." he looked at me intently.

"That Ishtar and I are about to give birth?"

"Might shock a few people, as I'm not sure how many people Gideon blabbed to. And well, it's been only three months since you conceived in the bullet car. They might have difficulty with the fact that you're..."

"Looking like I'm about to give birth next week? You should have warned me about those damned nanomites of yours. Not having morning sickness is wonderful, but having a baby in three months instead of nine is a little odd. Next time, we're doing it the normal way. Nine months, not three. And how about you? Don't you think you looking thirty years younger is going to scare Matthew?"

"I certainly hope so. He's been underestimating me for years now. It'll do him good to have his orderly Earthforce view on life shaken up."

Matthew Gideon

I wasn't sure what to expect when Alwyn and Sarah showed up this time, but I made sure that I had the regenerator in my left hand pocket. I also had John Matheson holding a few assorted containers of peanut butter, which seemed to have the unexpected effect of making John smirk.

Deborah didn't tell him, did she? I bet she told Lily, and she was going to pay for that later. The price would be something we'd both enjoy.

The craft docked, and then with a slight hiccup, Alwyn and the women in his life departed his ship. Sarah and Ishtar were both obviously pregnant, and Alwyn looked years--even decades--younger. He gave me an amused smirk, while I stared at him. Alwyn's hair was in the same distinct tonsure crew cut style that Galen affected, and he now also wore a long black coat and leather pants. He was agilely cossetting both of the pregnant women in his life with one arm, while carrying his staff in his free hand. It wasn't his usual one, instead it was black oak, I believed, and decorated with silver. For once, Ishtar wasn't hiding. Instead, she was fully displayed and preening on Alwyn's shoulder.

Sarah Chambers looked like she was about a week away from delivering. This was really odd, as when I saw her three months ago, her belly had been flat. Sarah's new maternity figure didn't just surprise me; it shocked the hell out of John. I heard the sound of a few containers being dropped, and Ishtar gave John a disgusted hiss at the loss of all that luscious peanut butter.

Alwyn warbled at Ishtar, a warning to behave herself, I think, as the pregnant dragon sniffed.

I didn't know what shocked me most. That Alwyn and Sarah were obviously outing their relationship; that Alwyn had completely dropped the grandfatherly Mage routine; that Sarah looked like she was going to deliver on the spot, or that John Matheson was completely and utterly speechless. My total astonishment made me an easy target for the Mage, as he made a beeline for me.

He grabbed my head, and looked at my ear. "Seems to have healed nicely."

"Alwyn. You look... good." Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that John Matheson was quite pale, and looked like he was going to pass out. He was trying not to stare at Sarah, or at her belly, or at the fact that it was obvious who the father was: a Technomage who suddenly looked a lot younger than the last time we'd met up. Sarah was being extremely cruel, as she put her hands behind her back and stretched, her bulging belly being even more noticeably displayed for my XO's bulging eyes.

"Took my vitamins. Now come along." He offered his arm to Sarah, and the two of them walked over to the bullet car. For some reason, they appeared amused that it was this particular bullet car, and they had to sit in a specific spot in the car after much whispering among themselves. Alwyn was busy tracing patterns on Sarah's belly, and she kept whispering at him to stop it. They were grinning at each other, and Alwyn had his arm around her. The spell casting completed, he placed Ishtar in his lap. His staff, he carelessly placed in the empty seat next to him, as it was obvious that nobody was going to even think about touching it.

I managed to keep my smart mouth shut, until we were alone in the bullet car, then couldn't resist. "So who knocked her up, then?"

Alwyn glared at me, his piercing blue eyes as cold as ice. "That is not a very polite way of describing Sarah's condition. Mind your manners, or I might just mind them for you."

I gave him my most innocent smile. "Sarah?" I looked over at her quizzically. "Are you knocked... in a delicate condition, Sarah?"

Before she could reply, I turned back to Alwyn. "I wasn't talking about Sarah, I'd never be so presumptuous. I was talking about Ishtar." I pointed to where the golden dragon rested in Alwyn's lap, quietly preening, obviously pregnant. "I can guess who's responsible for Sarah's condition, but how the hell did you manage that? And don't tell me that she's just been pigging out on peanut butter."

I should know by now to keep my damn mouth shut, as Alwyn snapped his fingers and there in front of me appeared a 3-dimensional anatomy of a female dragon. In blunt terms, he described more about dragon fucking than I ever wanted to know, including how humidity and wind speed affected depth of penetration. John Matheson was turning scarlet; Sarah was smirking, and Ishtar... Ishtar was warbling what I could only imagine to be the most obscene dragon comments known to Technomage-dom.

I think my ears were scorched *and* scarlet, as the impression I got was that both Ishtar AND Sarah

had rather wild mating flights, and I really DIDN'T need to know that.

Trust me.

We got to our stop, thankfully without another in-service infomercial on dragon reproduction, and I was happy.

Alwyn was careful with both his ladies, and Sarah was leaning on his arm, when I suddenly heard another voice.

"But the Captain said to his XO, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a commlink on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this is my friend, Alwyn, was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."

Great. Another Mage. Just what I needed. Next thing you know, Eilerson is going to show up. Alwyn and Galen looked at each other, and I suddenly realized that there was a rather striking resemblance between the two men. Maybe it was the haircut or the clothing?

"Always so ostentatious, Galen," Alwyn smiled. "I need to get both of them to our quarters, then we can verbally spar like old times."

"I can find my own way," Sarah announced, acerbically. "I used to work here, remember?"

Sarah and her odd little... family, for want of a better term, left, and I turned to look at Galen. Shit. He was smiling slightly, which meant trouble.

"Well?" I asked him.

He suddenly shook his head, and looked at me. "Matthew?"

"What's that all about?"

"That?" he questioned.

"THAT" I stressed. "Was lost and now found, was dead and now alive. Alwyn as the Prodigal Son? I need to know, so I can order John to kill the fatted calf."

"Why do I always get the fun jobs?" John Matheson softly queried.

"There are different sects in the Mages, I've told you that."

I nodded, annoyed, as Galen was beginning to sound like my grade school teacher.

"Alwyn used to be... a Knight, I suppose that to be the closest correct term. When his partner died, Alwyn renounced everything to wander to and fro on the earths, trying to learn as much as he could about healing. He was lost, and he's found himself."

Dinner that night was interesting, if for nothing other than the fact that most of the party was

stunned speechless by the revelation that Alwyn had fathered Sarah's child. I'd told the ship's cook that if he couldn't find a fatted calf in the deep freeze, he'd better make a damned good attempt at faking it. Then I ordered one of the mess halls closed, and made a ship wide announcement telling the crew that free beer was going down at the far end of the ship. I'll get another reprimand for that from Earthforce one day.

But it cleared the dining room for the nine of us to settle down to the prodigal feast. Lily brought her three month old daughter to show everyone. Blue-green eyes, getting greener by the day, red hair and the spitting image of her mother. I was still none the wiser. Alwyn played with her for a while, which made me nervous, as he had a rather smug smile on his face.

Everyone was moving around and mingling. I heard Luke, Sarah and Alwyn discussing the birth cycle of dragons at one point and beat a hasty retreat. Then Sarah and Deborah started swapping stories on morning sickness, and I decided that dragon delivery methods were more fun. Apparently, Sarah Chambers was just cruising her way to motherhood thanks to a few nanomites. Deborah had been irritated to find out that Sarah had no morning sickness, her back didn't hurt, and she was feeling peppy and energetic. Deborah had been really annoyed about how Sarah was missing the joys of maternity. She got over it quickly, when I offered to ask Alwyn to father her next child. She'll make me pay for that one, someday.

Angel and Galen had a competition going, with Angel using her telekinesis to make the condiments dance, while Galen tried to knock them over with fireballs. That got Ishtar's attention, and she started to chase the pepper shaker around the room, trying to flame it. I decided to call a halt when she cremated the mustard, while Alwyn and Sarah stood back and laughed. I'd been looking forward to having some of that mustard with my fatted calf.

Cook had done his best, and while it wasn't *exactly* fatted calf, it was the best damned piece of roast beef I'd eaten in a long time. He must have been saving it up for a special occasion, which this certainly was. It would have been even better with mustard, but you can't have everything. Well, not when you've got two Technomages, three witches and a dragon in the room, you can't.

Alcohol may be illegal on Earthforce ships, but I've never let petty regulations stop me having a good time. What's the point in being Captain, if you can't bend the rules? So we had some very fine wines with dinner and an excellent brandy afterwards. Can't have a teetotaler feast for the prodigal's return, can you?

The toasts got increasingly outlandish as everyone began trying to outdo the previous speaker. I made my favorite toast to my darling wife, a toast passed onto to me by an Irish crewmember. It could have been written for Deborah, and I enjoyed making her blush when I recited it.

"Here's to the lady who dresses in black,
who always looks sweet and never looks slack.
And when she kisses, she kisses so sweet,
she makes things stand that have no feet."

I knew she'd punish me for that one later, and I couldn't wait to get back to our quarters to find out what she had in mind. I had high hopes that a certain red silk corset and riding crop might be involved.

I quietly hoped that the Drakh didn't choose that moment to launch an attack, as I'm not sure that I was in any fit state to fight a battle. Hell, I was feeling so damned mellow that I'd probably have

asked them on board for a drink. Fortunately, I have a responsible XO who stuck to water.

After dinner, we were all relaxing with coffee, when Ishtar started bugling. Everyone turned to look at Alwyn, on whose shoulder she was perched. He looked at her quizzically, chirped at her a few times, then looked shocked. He turned back to me with a rather sickly smile.

"Would you have a fireproof room available? Somewhere quiet and dark, which you won't need for a couple of weeks?"

"Why?" [What a stupid question,] I thought, even as I said it.

"Ishtar's in labor and when she pushes, she tends to erupt at both ends."

I've never seen a room clear so fast.

Alwyn snickered slightly, and I suddenly wanted the old, weebling, lecherous Alwyn back. This new one made me nervous, especially since he seemed far more intense than the other Alwyn, while still maintaining that unpredictable sense of whimsy. Sarah seemed rather serene about being involved with the person I was rapidly willing to describe as 'The most dangerous person I know, who's supposed to be on my side.'

Galen and Alwyn's relationship had made another change, as now Galen was obviously deferring to the older man. There must be some sort of hierarchy in the ranks of Magedom, and now that Alwyn was back, he was the big Mage on Campus.

"Joke. It's actually because the baby dragon is going to be a little photophobic for a bit."

"I've always wanted a dragon as a familiar," Galen drolly announced.

"You'll have to wait for this one. It'll be at least seventy five years before its old enough."

"That's true, but I thought I'd put my name in first." Galen gave Alwyn a sweet smile, which Alwyn ignored.

"Sorry, dear boy, but my son and heir has first call." He pointed at Sarah's stomach and smiled fondly. She and Luke were the only others still at the table. These medics are made of strong stuff.

Ishtar bugled again, and even I could hear the note of desperation in her tone. That dragon wanted to get something out of her, and she wanted it out NOW.

Alwyn rolled up his sleeves, as did Sarah and Luke, and in a few minutes, I was witnessing the birth of a baby dragon. My part in the proceedings was to turn the lights down low and be on standby, just in case they needed something. Like what? I dreaded to think. God, it was almost as bad as watching Marcus being born except for the fact that Ishtar was better behaved than Deborah, and this time, Alwyn didn't put me in a birthing chair. Thankfully, Ishtar didn't curse and scream, and she didn't try to bite me. A definite improvement on my wife. No, instead Ishtar just whimpered once or twice while Sarah whistled to her.

It was a very little thing, barely bigger than my finger, and suddenly it hit me. Seventy-five years. How old were these damn Mages that waiting seventy-five years wasn't such a bad thing? Then reality hit; that damned dragon had given birth--spawned?--on my leather jacket. I was about to say something,

when Ishtar looked at me with her magenta eyes. I don't speak dragoneeze, but I think she was telling me, 'Matt, my boy, don't push me, OK? Or else I'll flame something a little nearer and dearer to Deborah's heart.'

So I, having learned discretion since I married, decided to keep my mouth shut. There are certain parts of my anatomy that Deborah rather likes, and I'd hate to piss her off by losing them. Won't she be proud of me?

But I'm going to need a new leather jacket. Do you have any idea what a dragon's afterbirth does to leather? I mean, I like a slightly distressed look, but there's distressed and then there's totally, utterly anguished and destroyed! I tried to imagine what I was going to put on the requisition for a replacement.

"Give reasons why replacement apparel is required."

"A dragon gave birth on it, and the placenta burned a hole right through the back."

Oh yeah, I could see some Earthforce bureaucrat going for that one.

But the baby was pretty enough for me to forgive it. I leaned forward to get a look (as if that would help). "Is it a girl dragon or a boy dragon?"

Galen gave me his best supercilious sneer. "Have you ever tried to sex a dragon, Matthew? Then you should know that it won't decide what sex it is, until it's at least thirty Earth years old. We're not quite sure whether it knows itself before then, but if it does, it's not telling."

"GALEN." Both Alwyn and Sarah chimed in with that verbal smack on the wrist, and Galen flushed slightly.

Interesting. Very, very interesting. The change in dynamics among my crew and friends, since meeting up with the Space Witches was noticeable. Ishtar and family bonded for a few moments, and Luke suddenly gave me a wide grin.

"What?" I asked. Another stupid question. I appeared to be two steps behind everyone tonight, so I mentally vowed that next time I'd make John drink instead of me.

"I wonder if you have to worry about diapers and a Technomage baby?"

I looked at him suspiciously. "Why do you say that?"

Luke pointed to Sarah, who was standing, watching Alwyn cooing over his other lady and her new baby. Sarah had both hands pressing against the small of her back, her stomach thrust impossibly far forward. I swear that even Lily hadn't looked that big just before she dropped the twins, and I was totally certain that Sarah had grown since she'd arrived on board. I suddenly had a horrible thought. What if she were carrying twins? Triplets? Quads?! Oh God, the thought of all those baby Alwyns running around the place had me close to passing out.

As I watched, Sarah's stomach rippled, and she let out a low moan. Oh shit. What had I done to deserve this?

Alwyn gave her a searching look, and then whispered something quickly.

"Better?" He asked quietly.

"Much."

He quickly began casting a few glyphs on the air, and they zipped over to Sarah. With a tinkle like breaking glass, they broke over her. Alwyn was walking over to her, while he was still casting, and he began tracing sigils on her bulging belly.

"That should keep the labor pains from being too severe. Now, if I've estimated this right, it will probably take about twelve hours? That should allow enough time for Max, Dureena and that lovely shape-shifter to show up. They'll be here in about two hours."

"Max?" I asked.

"They're showing up. We told them to be here around that time." Alwyn's tone was brusque, but he was being extremely gentle with Sarah as he was tracing more and more glyphs on her body.

"Why are they coming here?" This was just great. Two Technomages, one pregnant doctor, one... birthing dragon, and the partridge in the fucking pear tree was Max Eilerson. Today had seemed like a nice normal day when I woke up. I wondered briefly if I could turn the clock back and start again. About forty-five years ought to do it. That would take me back to six months before I was born.

"Sarah's in labor. The baby is being born, Matthew." Galen said that with a voice dripping in the 'Oh-I'm-such-a-smart-Technomage-and-you're-a-dumb-fuck' tone that I hate. "There are rituals that need to be performed and, well, her family needs to be present."

"...good luck lies in odd numbers... There is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death," intoned the Magical Duo, who I suddenly wished would get the fuck off my ship and go do a magic show in New Vegas. With Ishtar and child, they'd probably draw in a big crowd of folks.

We were standing around Sarah, who was apparently having a pain-free delivery. Max and his many women had shown up, and we were all watching Sarah, who wasn't happy being the center of attention. She kept telling everyone to go and check that Ishtar was all right. We knew damned well that Ishtar was fine and that Sarah was just trying to distract us, so we ignored her. We'd carefully carried Ishtar and the baby dragon down darkened corridors to Medbay, still wrapped in my leather jacket. I knew that I'd lost it for good; Ishtar seemed to have decided that it made the perfect nest.

The sisters had gathered in one corner, with Deborah muttering darkly about why couldn't Alwyn have made her delivery pain-free. Luke was monitoring Sarah. Max, John and Dureena were chatting with her, while I stood in the corner with the Technomages, who were gesturing and muttering wildly.

Why did I have to be the Captain? Why couldn't *John* be Captain and deal with the Mages. Second thought, first thing tomorrow, I'm changing John's job description. He'll be in complete charge of our Technomage-relations department, meaning that these two Technomages would be totally his problem. NOT MINE!

"We don't have the proper number, Alwyn." Galen kept warning him. "We need thirteen and at least one more Mage."

Alwyn ignored him and began tracing glyphs on Sarah's abdomen. They were almost blindingly bright and then faded within moments. Luke had made her lie down in bed, even though she swore she felt absolutely wonderful. I wanted to see her in a birthing chair, with Alwyn under her, but no one was listening to me.

"No pain?" Alwyn gave Sarah a hopeful smile.

"Absolutely none. I think Luke's upset." She smiled quickly at Luke, who was shaking his head in disbelief.

"That one should have had you off the scale, and off the bed, threatening Alwyn's tripes." He jiggled the monitor cable for a bit, as though that was the thing at fault. Ha! Luke, it's a Mage thing, trust me. When they show up, the laws of natural science have a tendency to bend slightly. Bend? Try using the words warped completely, shattered and obliterated instead, it's closer to the truth, Luke.

"I rather like Alwyn's tripes," Sarah giggled.

"Thank you. Everyone take your places. It should only be a matter of minutes now. Luke, I hope you catch better than I've heard, and Matthew, try not to pass out, please?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Luke asked quickly.

"18-17, Deneb University X." Galen and Alwyn both chorused together.

"I don't believe it. How did you find out about that softball game? The suns were in my eyes!" Luke was beginning to babble slightly, trying to assure Alwyn that he'd dropped the ball for a variety of reasons, but that he wasn't even going to think of dropping Sarah's baby.

We were in a triangle, with Galen and Alwyn at the bases, and me standing at the top. I got the impression that keeping Sarah pain free had begun taking its toll on the older Mage, as he was leaning slightly on his staff. When he noticed that I was glancing at him, Alwyn immediately straightened up and glared back at me, as though daring me to make a comment about him being out of shape.

Not me, Alwyn. I liked being a Starship Captain. And I know that there's not much chance of a frog being a Starship Captain. Therefore my mouth was staying ZIPPED.

"He's not a Mage!" Galen protested. "We don't have the proper number."

"He'll have to do, and Ishtar will be the thirteenth. Try not to fumble too badly, Matthew." I started to mumble something about 'who the fuck does he think I am, a wide receiver?' then saw the look in Alwyn's eyes and shut up quickly. He began casting something, and the glyphs and sigils danced around me, and then I saw Galen turn pale. I really hate it when Galen turns that color, as I just know that something bad is going to happen.

"Alwyn... ALWYN? Are you..." Galen was flabbergasted, and at any other moment, I would have loved to see that look in his eyes, but not now. Not with Baby ETA five minutes and counting.

There was a sudden dimming of lights, and then I felt someone behind me.

[[If you don't mind, I'll stand here. Stand by your wife.]] It was a rather amused voice. Galen was whiter than a proverbial ghost, and everyone else was looking nearly as bad, except for Alwyn. Luke was looking rather wild-eyed, and I realized that this was probably his first up-front and personal encounter with both Technomages acting like Technomages and violating most of the natural laws. Alwyn smiled, then he bowed, and saluted whoever was behind me. Ishtar gave a welcoming cry that filled the room.

"Hello, Paedrig. Thank you for joining us."

I scooted across Medbay towards where Deborah stood with her sisters, but slid to a halt when I saw what awaited me there. While Alwyn and Galen had been busy raising the dead over by Sarah's bed, the four sisters had got together. I'd never seen them behave quite like this before, and I started to feel apprehensive about what was in store for us.

The sisters stood with their backs together, arms linked, each facing in a different direction. Their eyes were closed and their faces completely blank, then the air surrounding them started to glow white. A smell of ozone spread through Medbay, accompanied by a humming noise that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Well, if it wasn't the noise, it must have been the static electricity that seemed to emanate from the foursome. Luke began cursing as the monitors went wild, their readings flickering insanely.

I skidded over to where Max, John and Dureena stood watching with open mouths, thinking that there might be some safety in numbers. John nodded as I joined them and pointed back to where the two... three Technomages stood around Sarah's bed. I looked at Paedrig and shook my head. I didn't believe in ghosts. I still don't believe in ghosts, so that means he couldn't be a ghost. I have no idea what the hell he was, but I'm damn sure he wasn't a ghost.

The three of them also had their eyes closed and were humming a little tune of their own. I wondered briefly whether Luke would join in, then they could form a barbershop quartet. Poor Luke was stuck in the middle of whatever the Mages were up to, squatting between Sarah's legs, looking more like a catcher than a doctor. All he needed was a mitt. The look in his eyes was that of a catcher as a very large runner was about to slide into home and him. The air around the Mages began to glow too, but this had a reddish tinge, looking darker and distinctly more threatening than the field surrounding the women.

I turned to John and whispered, "Can you make contact with Lily, and find out what they're up to?"

John shook his head. "Lily's got a full telepathic block going. I can't read anything more than a centimeter away from me, never mind right across the room."

The white field surrounding the sisters started to stretch and grow towards the Mages, just as their red field expanded outwards. I suddenly realized what I was seeing and *really* started to worry. Technomages use Shadow technology for all their tricks. The sisters had been adapted and trained by the Vorlons.

Oh shit, I was about to see a rerun of the Shadow Wars in my Medbay, and the fields were going to meet right where the medical personnel were located.

The fields merged into one large, warm glow. The hairs on my arms joined the ones on the back of my neck in standing upright, then I realized that the hair on my head was drifting upwards too. I suddenly wondered if this was why Technomages were bald. The static electricity they generated would play havoc with their hair, if they had any. I looked over at where the sisters were standing and smiled. Tendrils of blonde hair curled around red, while black tangled in with blue, all merging together into a mass of multi-colored curls in the center. Getting them untangled could take some time.

The soft red glow settled on Sarah, surrounding her completely. I felt a surge of love and happiness, and looked over at Deborah again. She was sending, creating an atmosphere of warmth and love for the child to emerge into. I could feel myself relaxing into it, smiling inanely. Maybe we wouldn't see the last battle in the Shadow War, after all.

I found out later that each sister had used her powers to help Sarah. Deborah created the feelings of happiness and relaxation, Angel's telekinesis eased the baby's passage, using Ilas' shape-shifting skills to open Sarah painlessly, while Lily's ability to anticipate the future enabled them to sense when Sarah's next pain would arrive, and pass that information to the Technomages.

Galen, Alwyn and Paedrig had two functions. They wove the spells that removed Sarah's pain, and they channeled energy to the sisters, to allow them to complete their task without draining themselves.

Shadow technology and Vorlon enhancements working together to bring new life into the world. Perhaps there was hope for the universe after all, even with the mess the Shadows, Drakh and Vorlons had made. Max, John, Dureena and I, the mere mortals privileged to watch this miracle, stood in open mouthed amazement as the baby slid into Luke's waiting hands. He didn't need the mitt; he made a perfect catch without one. I tried not to laugh, when I realized that he was thanking a million different deities for not dropping this particular fly ball.

The sound of a baby's cry filled the air, accompanied by a soft crooning from Ishtar and Luke gently gave the baby to Sarah.

[[Good job, Alwyn. Perhaps the lad does have some potential.]] Paedrig gave Galen an appraising look. *[[If Elric's prejudices haven't been too firmly ingrained in his soul.]]*

"He's only a mere lad of a few centuries, so I've gradually been wearing them down, smoothing down the rough spots. But it's been difficult, Elric..."

"Was such a bombastic, pompous, stiff necked Mage." The two men finished that obvious long familiar complaint together. Obviously, Elric hadn't been particularly well liked by either one of them.

[[Enough of that. Introduce me, please.]]

"Absolutely. Paedrig, may I introduce you to Sarah? Sarah, this is Paedrig. I hope you don't mind that I invited him. Up to now, he was the only family I had, besides Ishtar."

I could only admire Sarah's calm acceptance of the situation. It isn't every day that you get introduced to your lover's ex... your lover's *dead* ex, when you're holding a baby that you gave birth to less than five minutes before.

She smiled sweetly at Paedrig. "I'm so pleased to meet you at last. Alwyn has told me so much about you."

Thinking about it, I guess it's easier to be nice to your lover's ex when he's dead. Difficult to get jealous about a ghost... not a ghost... don't believe in ghosts... OK, then, what was Paedrig? Oh! He was just a slightly transparent Technomage. That really wasn't much better than the ghost idea, I decided, but I'd work on that later.

I moved over to where the sisters had relaxed their stance, and the field surrounding them had dissipated. Deborah opened her eyes and smiled at me, as she saw me moving towards her, then nearly bowled me over with a surge of love and affection for me. God, I love it when she does that. I took her in my arms and kissed her, then looked over her shoulder to where the tangled mass of blonde, red, blue and black hair held the four women together.

"You seem a little tied up there. Do you need scissors?"

She laughed and shook her head, careful not to pull on the tangle. "Ilas and Angel will take care of it."

I watched with amusement as Ilas' hair shrank back towards her head, the blue curls sliding from the mass. Then the knot started to move, apparently on its own, as Angel used her telekinesis to untangle the rest. Within a few seconds, they were separated.

I grinned at Deborah. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

John and Luke had come over to claim Lily, while Max and Dureena hugged Ilas between them. Keeping my arm around Deborah on one side, I pulled Angel into a hug with my other arm, then we all went to be introduced to Paedrig and the new baby.

After a while, Paedrig stepped between Sarah and us, then motioned for us to let Alwyn and Sarah have some privacy. We found ourselves being shuffled to the other side of the room by our 'spirit guide.'

[[I do not need to be introduced to you, for I know each of you by your chromosomes, your hopes, your dreams and your despairs. For when I was summoned, your dead spoke to me, and asked that I speak to you while I am on this plane.]]

Wonderful. Trust a Technomage to throw a curve ball during a happy occasion. Even the transparent ones were apparently Technomage enough to enjoy ruining a good time.

Paedrig

I looked around the group gathered before me and felt glad that my old partner had found new friends and family. We had been so close for so many years that Alwyn had let go of most of his other ties, as we had thought we had 'world enough, and time' to be together for eternity, but it wasn't to be. I knew the breadth and depth of Alwyn's grieving for me, and it had lasted for centuries.

But he was a much younger man than I, and still had many years of life left to him; I was happy that he had found someone to share it with at last. Before I could tell him so, I had duties to perform. For while Alwyn had provided the necessary life force for me to arrive on this plane, the gate between the two spheres was closing rapidly, and it was being held open only by the wills of those who had asked me to deliver messages to their loved ones. When I had been summoned, they had come to me, pleading for me to speak with these people, and I had agreed.

[[Dureena, Ilas and Maximilian. I will speak to you first.]] I watched as they made their way towards me, Maximilian with his arms around his two ladies. Dureena stood straight and proud while I spoke to them, although I could feel her fear. Her people had legends of spirits that were extremely unpleasant, no wonder the poor child was fearful. I spoke to her in her language at length, telling her that I meant her no harm. The little shape-shifter in Max's other arm showed nothing but good-natured curiosity.

I gave them the message from their lost son, the child who had been so cruelly and unjustly taken from them. I watched their tears as I told them of his love for them all, and his happiness in knowing that one day he would be reunited with them. Having made contact with him, I assured them that I would keep an eye on their child until they would meet later, but that he wasn't alone, for he was the joy of Dureena's mother, who had recognized his soul when he had arrived. They left me, holding each other for comfort, and I knew that when their grief subsided they would be happier for my message.

My message for Luke Raven was simple. His parents still loved him and missed him and his sister. They sent their love and told him not to feel guilty about his sister.

John Matheson and Lilith Morgaine were more difficult. Neither of them really remembered the people who had sent them their messages. Both had memories of their mothers, but they were unclear. Using my talents, and abilities, I tried to strengthen their memories until they could firmly remember their mother's faces. John had been taken from his mother at an early age. He remembered her face and a happy childhood, but had lost all of that when his powers manifested themselves and he had undergone the trauma of being torn away from his previous life. The adaptations the Vorlon had made to Lilith had erased many of her memories and suppressed others. But in both cases, the messages were clear. Their mothers loved them and had grieved when their children were taken from them.

For John, the message also conveyed his mother's pride in his achievements and for his steadfast resolve in remaining true to himself. I watched as John, Luke and Lilith walked away, arms wrapped tightly around each other, and again, I knew that when the tears stopped, they would be comforted.

I summoned Galen to stand before me, looking closely at the younger man. He may have mourned the loss of his teacher, but it might have been his saving. With Alwyn's influence, it may be possible to prevent him becoming as pompous and narrow minded as Elric. I hoped that it was not too late.

I gave him his message from Isabelle. *[[She sends you her love, and her thanks for taking her to the Well of Forever, but she also admonishes you for betraying a friend to do so. For her, friendship and love stand before promises to the dead. Never forget that again.]]*

Galen's eyes filled with tears, and he nodded then turned away, for once in his life lost for words. There may indeed be hope for the lad.

[[ISHTAR! I salute you for a job well done in keeping that fool alive, and I give you my undying thanks.]]

She whistled at me, and I warbled back at her, our voices joining easily, as we trilled an aria together. The two of us had sung together often, and I realized that Max was laughing softly.

[[After all this, a singing dead Mage isn't that remarkable, now is it?]]

Now for the skeptic among us. I had purposely used the word 'undying', and I had seen his eyes roll at that use of that term. I turned to the Captain of this ship, the man who refused to believe in ghosts, even though I could see how his own personal specters haunted him night and day. *[[Matthew Gideon. Will you hear your message? My summoning will fade soon, and I must depart.]]*

"Yes. I'll hear it." His voice plainly said that he'd listen, but like hell he'd believe what I had to say. I had to smile slightly. I could imagine Alwyn, Galen and Gideon having arguments where all refused to budge.

[[Captain Ross and his crew wishes to thank you for trying to avenge them. The crew of the Cerberus rests easy now, knowing that they haven't been forgotten.]] I could see his eyes brighten with tears, and I continued. *[[The Captain, Lou, said to tell you that he hopes you finally forgive yourself for surviving, and can forgive him for leaving you. It was... necessary.]]*

The Captain nodded and swallowed hard, all emotion hidden behind an unmoving face, then turned to his wife, who took him into her arms and held him. When I called her name, she released him and turned to me, but kept tight hold of his hand.

[[Deborah Montgomery, I have a message from your mother.]]

She shook her head. "I don't want it. She never had time to speak to me during her life, why should I listen to her now that she's dead?" She turned and started to walk away, but her husband held her back, talking to her quietly, trying to persuade her to listen. While they talked, I turned to her sister.

[[Very well then. Angelique, my message for you is from a friend. Nikarran feels that he failed you by dying when he did. He knows how much you suffered after his death, and he is sorry. He begs your forgiveness.]]

Angel started to weep bitterly, crying that Nikarran had never let her down and she had failed him. While I assured her that he did not feel that way about her, her older sister went to her and held her closely. Gideon followed them and putting his arms around them both, he whispered to his wife again, and finally, she turned to me. He still refused to believe in what I was, but my words had affected him deeply.

"Very well. What does my mother have to say?" Deborah's voice was a challenge to me, as though daring me to offer her some sort of platitude.

[[Simply this. That she is sorry for having abandoned you. That she did love you, but was unable to show it. She says that she thinks you'll understand now how hard it can be to let others see your feelings.]]

Deborah took a deep breath and nodded, then went back to comforting her sister. Her face betrayed nothing, but I could feel the grief in her soul. I wish I knew whether the messages I had brought to those two sisters had brought more comfort than pain. Nikarran had wept uncontrollably while he had given me the message, and his wife had been with him, trying to console him. These messages had not been for the living alone, but also a way for the dead to try to atone for what had been left unsaid during their lives.

I spoke to the group as a whole and asked for some time alone with Alwyn and Sarah, watching as they left us.

[[Sarah, my dear, I am so happy that you have come into my old friend's life and shown him how to love again. I know that you have had your share of grief, and hope that my last message will bring you comfort.]]

Sarah looked up at me, smiling sadly, holding her newborn son in her arms. "Who is my message from, Paedrig? There are so many of the dead who could blame me for their deaths. If I'd been smarter--worked harder--maybe there would be some alive today who are gone."

"Don't think that, Sarah." Alwyn whispered that to her softly, as he kissed her hair.

The poor child carried a burden of guilt that no one should have to suffer. Perhaps I could lessen that load just a little, for I loved this girl-child who had saved my partner from his unending grief and depression.

[[My message is from two who love you as much now as they did when they were alive. Your sister and your niece wish you to know that they are together and happy. They know how you blame yourself for their deaths, but they want you to be happy again. They know you did everything you could, and they hold no blame to you, except for the fact that you believe you failed them. They send their love and their blessings for your child.]]

Alwyn took her into his arms and held her closely while she wept, looking at me and nodding his thanks.

[[And so old friend, I must leave. For you, my message comes only from me, but it comes from the heart. Ti voglio bene assai, ma tanto tanto bene sai. I love you very much, very, very much, you know. Now that you have learned to love again, you must learn to live again. Our years together were happy and long, and I will cherish the memory of those years throughout eternity. But now you have a new life to build and to cherish.]]

He nodded, and I felt my spirit being pulled. I had to leave quickly, or else I would be trapped between the spheres forever more.

[[I must go now, for the gate closes as the gatekeeper has returned to its post. Forgive me, old friend, for having darkened the mood of this blessed event, but the others wanted their messages to cross the spheres this one time.]]

I was being pulled away from them, when I realized that I had not given anything to the newborn child, so desperately, I threw my staff at Alwyn. He grabbed at it reflexively, and his eyes widened when he realized that it was physically in his hands. It had been shattered when I had died, at the hands of the darkness that had been spreading unchecked across the universe. Now it was in his hands, my gift to his child. The young boy would have to grow into it, but it would be my benediction to him.

[[I salute you, young Jaysen, and understand that I will be with you on the long road you will travel, for I give you my staff to use as your own! ALWYN!]]

"PAEDRIG!"

Matthew Gideon

I was outside of Medbay, my arm tight around Deborah's waist, looking at the others who had been involved with this latest adventure of ours. Each of us had been pondering our own messages from our dead, and we had broken into our separate groups to think and to resolve our issues. While we felt uncomfortable talking about what had just happened, we all stayed together for some sort of emotional support. Galen was a billion light years away, but I felt the need to talk with him, to put some perspective on this incident.

"Was that...?" I gestured.

"Paedrig? I'm assuming it was, as Alwyn recognized him." Galen admitted that softly. "As did Ishtar."

"You're not sure?" Come on, Galen. Is this supposed to make me feel better, that you didn't recognize the third Mage?

"No." He looked at me, and I was surprised by the pain in Galen's eyes. Galen, always so smug and so sure of himself, wasn't so self-assured right now. Then again, neither was I. "Paedrig died long before I was born, so I never met him, but I believe it was him. The two of them worked together as if they had been partners for years."

The door to Medbay opened, and we all looked up to see Alwyn leaving. He carried two staffs, and looked rather pensive for a new father. My wife and he exchanged a look that I couldn't read, but I could hear his whispered thanks, and then Alwyn walked away.

Deborah and I went back to our quarters and held each other, fending off the ghosts and the darkness with our love. The message from my old Captain had eased some of the pain I'd carried since I'd lost my ship and all my friends, but it didn't change my desire to find out what had destroyed them.

Deborah wouldn't talk about her message. She didn't speak, she didn't cry, she wouldn't show any feeling or response to what had happened. She just curled up around a book I'd never seen before, an old child's book, 'The Wizard of Oz'. That night I realized again just how badly being abandoned as a child had hurt her. I did the only thing I could. I held her tightly and told her that I'd never leave her. And I never will.

Paedrig

The gate closed completely, and then those who had helped me make the crossing surrounded me. Did they get their messages? They begged for a confirmation from me. I looked in the eyes of Zanderi, Terrans, Starship Captains, Technomages, Brakiri and others.

I nodded, and I felt their next question overwhelm me.

Did they believe?

Did they hear?

DID THEY BELIEVE?

YES.

Matthew Gideon

I saw Alwyn, Sarah, Jaysen, Ishtar and the baby dragon off a few days later. Sarah carried Jaysen cradled in her arms, while Alwyn carried Ishtar and her baby cradled in *my* leather jacket. Earthforce never did believe my explanation for how I lost it, but Alwyn sent me a rather nice, new jacket to make it up to me. Actually, he sent it to Deborah, as a present to her, with a rather risqué comment about how he knew she liked me in leather.

To be honest, she prefers me out of it.

Two months after Jaysen was born, we saw the results of Alwyn and Sarah's wild ride on the bullet car and Deborah's projection of Ishtar's Dragon-lust. The five female Narns we had on board all gave birth, producing a total of eleven little Narns. While every other species on board was up to date with their birth control shots, including me, there's no such thing for the Narns. The only method of birth control they have available is abstinence. No wonder they're so interested in inter-species sex.

So six of my best Marines, Narn males all, ended up carrying the babies around in their pouches for the next four months, spreading the eleven babies between them. Have you ever watched a male Narn try to fight when carrying a couple of pouchlings around? It's pathetic. I had to put them all on paternity leave, until the pouchlings were ready to leave their fathers. They were so grateful that they insisted on calling the babies after me. So that's why there are now eleven small Narns running around the ship with names like G'Matt, D'Gid, N'Deon and so on. Fortunately, they all get to choose an adult name later in life. I hope.

Personally, I think M'Tson has a nice ring to it.

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four I

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