

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K - Part 1: The Mage, the Thief, the Linguist and Their Lover

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



Max is in for a ride.

Chapter 1

May 2271 - Mars

"He's beautiful."

That was whispered quietly, so as not to wake the beautiful one, and Sarah smiled.

"I'm biased, but I agree, Dureena."

"Fortunately, he looks like his mother, as she's by far the better looking of his parents," admitted Alwyn, giving Sarah a rather fond look. "It's awfully quiet around here. Where's the rest of your family?"

"They decided that it would be best if Vya wasn't around Ishtar, as the last time he saw her, he kept trying to transform himself into a golden dragon. Vya's not that old, and he hasn't figured out that he can only do humanoid shapes yet, so he looked like a rather odd baby human-dragon hybrid, and he couldn't get the wings quite right. Where are Ishtar and her little one?"

"Dragons are rather advanced, and Daddy Dragon is keeping an eye on the little dragonet right now, while teaching it the important things required of being a dragon. Ishtar refuses to tell me who the father is." There was a chirp of agreement from one of Alwyn's pocket. "I'm quite convinced it's because even she's not sure."

There was a hiss, and Alwyn looked amused. "Now I've gone and offended her. Ishtar, I didn't *really* call you a tart just now. Oh dear, what's the matter?"

Dureena's golden eyes were full of tears, and Alwyn suddenly snapped his fingers, creating an ethereal crib for the sleeping Jaysen to be placed into. Sarah and Alwyn both moved to sit on opposite sides of Dureena, and Sarah hugged her old friend, letting her cry herself out on a comforting shoulder.

"It's OK," Sarah whispered. "Let it out. You need to let it out."

Wiping her eyes, Dureena looked embarrassed. "Sorry."

"Don't be. What's the problem?" Sarah asked.

"If it's Maximilian, I'll kill him if you want," Alwyn offered helpfully. The Mage's blue eyes were suddenly fierce, and there was an answering hiss from one of his many pockets. "Or just make his life miserable until he apologizes for upsetting you. It must be him, not that lovely shape shifter."

"ALWYN," Sarah and Dureena chimed together.

"Why else would you be upset?" The Mage asked, moving himself to sit on top of the rather expensive coffee table. Ishtar popped her head out of the pocket, and then decided she'd have a better view from Alwyn's shoulder. Her wedge shaped head drew closer to Dureena, and then she began to warble softly to Alwyn. The Mage looked startled for a moment, and then sighed.

Alwyn moved his hand to cup Dureena's face. "Oh, Dureena. It must be so hard for you, and Paedrig didn't help, did he? With the message from your child? Paedrig would be heartbroken to realize his message ripped that wound open again. My lover was never one to be intentionally cruel."

The thief nodded her head, and whispered, "I know that, but I want a child so badly, and we've tried, but it hasn't worked. I'm worried that I'm unable to conceive, because of what happened and how it happened."

"Why didn't you say something to me? Or to Luke, if you couldn't come to me?" Sarah asked. "We're friends, Dureena."

"Well, why didn't you come to me about you being involved with Alwyn? Or tell me that the two of you were expecting Jaysen? Or that all this time, Alwyn was pretending to be old and decrepit, when he really wasn't?"

Sarah began to speak, but Alwyn interrupted. "My fault, completely. Sarah and I had discussed it, but I was concerned about her friends' reaction to the news that she was involved with a Mage. I was

especially worried about your family's reaction to the news, particularly since Galen was involved in what happened to you."

The four of them, doctor, Mage, thief and dragon sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Do you think that seeing Sarah will help Dureena?" Ilas asked Max. "I figured if the three of us were away from her, that she might confide in Sarah."

"I'm not sure, because it's partly that damned ghost Mage's fault that she's hit this depression. Every time I think she's beginning to cope again, something happens and she skids back into sadness." Max sighed.

"It has to work. Why don't we go back home, and see how things are working out?"

Alwyn suddenly snapped his fingers, and then stood up rapidly. "Come along now, Dureena. Take all your clothes off, and go lie on the dining room table. Sarah and I will be along shortly. Ishtar, please keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't run off or anything like that."

Dureena began to laugh, "Alwyn, you were never my type, and even this youthful version doesn't really excite me."

"No, Dureena. You forget. Alwyn's a healer, and well, since I'm a doctor, let's see what we can do for you." Sarah made a shooping motion to Dureena, and the thief suddenly looked hopeful.

"Do you think it might work?"

Dureena was lying on the table, and she was suddenly struck by the idea that perhaps she should have brought a blanket, as Sarah and Alwyn appeared to be taking their time to arrive in the dining room. Ishtar was gliding about the room, and Dureena wondered if the dragon would be offended if she asked her to stop. The small dragon was only occasionally flapping her wings, but still it was often enough that the resulting breeze only made Dureena feel colder.

"Unbelievable. I'm their only patient, and I still have to wait." She sighed, and found her hand sliding down to her belly. "Please, let this work."

It was almost thirty minutes later when Alwyn walked into the room, carrying two staffs, with Sarah right behind him. He whispered something, and Sarah grinned.

"This is just unnatural, hanging your baby in mid air. No matter how many times I do it, part of me expects Jaysen to go 'splat' on the floor." She carefully placed the sleeping child in the air, and Alwyn began making a pendulum motion with his hand. The child began swinging in time to Alwyn's graceful movement.

"Swing," He said in answer to Dureena's stunned look. "Keeps him asleep, as I don't want him waking up during the middle of this. Now, stretch out, and put your hands over your head."

Dureena did so, feeling slightly disappointed that Alwyn was giving her naked body only a professional look. While the Mage wasn't Ilas and Max, Dureena would have expected more of a reaction than she was getting. As a former slave, she knew that most humanoids found her body attractive, but the Mage appeared not to notice. His blue eyes looked at her dryly, with an almost clinical detachment.

"Extend your hands," Sarah instructed. "You're going to have to hold onto this. Don't let go, even if you start feeling a little odd. Your feet are going to have to rest on the other one."

There was a heavy staff being placed on her hands, and Dureena suddenly laughed. "I must look ridiculous, lying naked on a table."

"Ridiculous is as ridiculous does." Sarah and Alwyn explained in unison.

"Very well then." Alwyn announced. "Dureena, I'm going to be the one doing most of the work, with Sarah being my lovely assistant. Don't get upset, if I touch you in a few rather intimate spots. I can assure you that my intentions are completely honorable."

"OK."

"What's happening?" Dureena asked. She had turned her head to look at the dining room wall that was completely stripped of the Van Gogh's and Picasso's that had formerly hung there. Instead, the wall was now displaying what Dureena believed to be her internal organs. It was interesting, though slightly disconcerting, to see one's insides displayed on the wall of your dining room.

"We're displaying your insides on the wall over there." Alwyn answered helpfully.

"I guessed that," she dryly commented.

"We're taking a look at your physiology, and figuring out what the problem might be. This might take longer than you expect, because we really couldn't find much in the way of Zanderi physiology books." Sarah smiled down at Dureena, "Ignore him, sometimes his answers are a little less than informative, especially when he's casting."

"You forget, I'm used to Galen. He invented the term cryptic." Dureena assured Sarah.

"Cold?" Alwyn asked.

"A little."

"Let's see what we can do. It would be rather inconsiderate of you to expire from pneumonia, especially if you were fertile at the time. You're going to feel a little warmth from the staffs, so just keep in contact with them."

There was something spreading from the staffs, meeting in the middle of her body, and while it was warm, there was a distinct feeling of lust involved. Alwyn was spell-casting, tracing arcane sigils on

her body, and Dureena was feeling rather... aroused. His callused hand accidentally brushed her nipple, and she bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out her disappointment when he quickly moved it south. His hand slowly slid down to her belly, and the thief was stunned by how his touch appeared to leave a trail of fire behind him.

"What's going on?" Dureena asked quickly, distressed about the feelings of lust that she was experiencing toward... *Alwyn and Sarah*? It was filling her body to the brim, this need to be touched and held, and it greatly disturbed her to be experiencing these sensations with others, rather than Ilas and Max.

"Sarah... explain," Alwyn said shortly, while he continued viewing the wall. His hands were resting on Dureena's hipbones, and she was humiliated to find that she wanted him to rest them between her legs. Alwyn would find his hands securely trapped between her strong thighs... The movement of his hands while trapped there would cause her intense pleasure, while he rubbed her innermost core.

No. This was WRONG, this Mage induced lust. A Mage had helped the killer of her child, and since then, she had hated not just Galen, but both of these men in their dark coats, with their smug superiority and their staffs. Alwyn was no better than Galen, Dureena believed, even with his involvement with Sarah. He had tried to hide behind the doddering old Mage routine, but Dureena had been horrified to find out that façade was a sham.

For a brief moment, Alwyn's explanation of why he had kept Sarah and his relationship private until Jaysen was about to be born had made complete sense to Dureena, and she had found herself softening in her dislike for the Mage. Sarah was a dear friend, and Dureena had tried to like the Mage for that reason alone. Alwyn was gentle with Sarah, carefully cossetting and preventing her from overworking herself, due to her overzealous nature.

But Sarah's lover had raised a specter of his Dead, to be present during the birth of Jaysen. Among Dureena's people, this was an unforgivable sin, for they believed that the Dead were present at births to steal the child's soul. Dureena remembered well her fear of the one Alwyn had called Paedrig, and his patient attempts at calming her by speaking to her in her language and his assurances that he meant no harm to the child. When she had fled from the area outside of Medbay, she had returned to her quarters and began performing her people's rituals that prevented the Dead from claiming a newborn's soul. Max and Ilas had wondered about her preoccupation, and so Dureena had lied to them, telling them that as Sarah's closest friend, she was performing her people's rites for the blessed event of a birth.

"It's silly, I'm sure, to you two, but I need to do this. ALONE." Dureena had repeated that until Max nodded his head and motioned for Ilas to leave her alone. She had been grateful that Max hadn't stayed, for he would have recognized the rite for what it was, a plaintive, pitiful attempt to convince the dead Paedrig to leave without young Jaysen's soul. [Alwyn, how could you have risked that?]

Paedrig claimed to have messages from their Dead, and what should have been a joyous experience for Sarah had been tainted with the blight of the grave and the Spirits of the Dead. And so Dureena had relentlessly performed the rituals, until she felt that Paedrig's restless spirit had been appeased and had returned back to his eternal sleep.

Yes, Alwyn cared for Sarah deeply, it was blatantly visible to one and all who saw how he doted on her, but he was less than human, this man of circuits and flesh, for he was a Technomage. Full of darkness and lies, much like the other one of his kind who had helped save the killer of her child from her vengeance. Now, in her desperation, she was forced to go to this man for his aid.

Another flood of passion filled her body, and she whimpered in fear.

WRONG.

This was so wrong!

Sarah was soon next to her, gently stroking her friend's face. "It's all right, we need to do this to find out if it's a problem with your endocrine system. An imbalance in it might be causing your problems."

"This scares me," Dureena admitted softly, not wanting Alwyn to hear.

"There's a fine line between pleasure and pain, so we're trying to keep you pain-free while we examine you." Sarah reassured Dureena tenderly. "We're running a lot of tests right now, and we don't want you to experience any pain. You've had enough pain to last a lifetime, Dureena."

"It's not the endocrine system. It appears we might have to go to plan B." Alwyn advised Sarah. "You'd better be the one to do this part, as I think it would make Dureena uncomfortable if I did it."

Sarah smiled gently at Dureena, and she moved out of Dureena's vision. Alwyn replaced Sarah, and Dureena found herself trembling in her fear of him and this unholy passion that filled her veins.

"No, I trust you," Dureena lied glibly, not wanting to let him know of her apprehension.

"You don't, Dureena," the Mage whispered softly in her ear. "You tolerate me for Sarah's sake, and for that I thank you, for she doesn't realize how much her closest friend truly despises and fears me. If this works, perhaps you will forgive me for being what I was created to be. For I have done you no harm, Dureena, not like the other of my kind."

Sarah was moving Dureena's legs apart, and the thief began gasping as the lust flared again to a higher level. There was something warm between her legs, and Dureena found herself aching to be filled by it.

"What's happening?" The passion in her voice terrified her, as she was losing her self-control in front of HIM. Desperate for reassurance, even from a Mage, Dureena let go of the staff with one hand so she could grab his hand, and was reassured when she felt flesh and bone rather than metal and circuits.

"We're seeing if there's a blockage which is preventing the sperm and ovum from meeting up."

Her hips began to buckle, and she whimpered in terrified passion.

"It's all right, my little thief," the Mage assured her. "When you wake up, Ila and Max will be here. Let yourself go, and enjoy this."

Dureena let the maelstrom of pleasure overwhelm her, and she was horrified when she climaxed quickly and loudly while Alwyn still held her hand and Sarah stroked her hair. Soon she found herself drifting off to sleep, in spite of her efforts to stay awake.

"She's out cold." Sarah assured her mate. She removed her hand from Dureena's sleeping form, and sighed.

"Good. I couldn't talk freely in front of her. We've got problems, Sarah. There's a lot of scar tissue..." The Mage shook his head. "I was expecting some, but not that amount and certainly not that extensive."

"I noticed. Given how late in her pregnancy the baby died, Luke did a damn fine job repairing everything. I don't think I could have done better, but there was still a lot of damage."

The Mage began tracing sigils and glyphs on Dureena's abdomen, and the two healers stared at the wall. He shook his head tiredly after several minutes.

"It's not working. I'm going to have to do something a little more invasive." Alwyn began removing his jacket, and he gave the table an appraising look. "Looks sturdy, but I'm going to add a few strengthening spells to it. No doubt Eilerson would be rather upset if I broke the table."

"Dureena might not be too happy either, as she'd have to go out and steal a new one. Dining tables are a challenge, even for her," Sarah remarked dryly.

"No, not for the lovely Dureena. Oh, Sarah, I do love you. Your humor, your compassion, and that body of yours. Especially that body." He gave her a quick leer, while Sarah blushed.

"I know."

Alwyn gingerly straddled the naked Dureena's hips, and he began placing both hands on his patient's abdomen, while he talked to Sarah. Staring at the wall in order to visualize the damage, the Mage continued to palpate his patient's stomach.

"Nanomites. We're going to have to utilize a few of them in her, and they're going to have to repair the damage cell by cell. This could take awhile, as it's extremely delicate work."

"Do you think it will work?"

"For her sake, I hope it does."

"I wonder where they are? They must be here, as there're a few baby things about the place that aren't Vya's." Max smiled, "And I think that toy has a distinct Technomagical look to it."

"Maybe they're eating in the dining room," Ilas suggested.

"OK. Let's look there."

Max opened the door to find the no longer old Mage squatting over the sleeping Dureena's naked body, while Sarah watched. For a moment, Max and Ilas were stunned into speechlessness, and then Max suddenly commented, "When I hoped that the two of them might cheer Dureena up, I was thinking that Dureena would remain clothed and vertical."

The linguist gave a penetrating look at the comatose figure on the table.

"Conscious, too."

"Oh, Maximilian, do get your mind out of the gutter," Alwyn snapped. "While I'm sure it's nice and warm down there, it's long past time for you to see the light of day."

Max began to bristle, and Sarah quickly jumped in to prevent the imminent brawl.

"Max, Ilas. We think we can help Dureena. There's a lot of scar tissue from when she lost the baby, and we're trying to repair the damage. If it works, that means she'll be able to conceive."

Sarah's explanation took the wind from Max's sails, and the man almost visibly deflated in front of them. Dureena's two partners went to her side, and Max began gently stroking her face.

"We've been trying to get her to talk to you, but she's been... difficult." The man from IPX regretfully admitted. "She's been on this roller coaster of conflicting emotions, terrified of going to you and scared to find out that something's really wrong."

"Don't blame her, she's been afraid of me. I cannot blame her after what happened," Alwyn affirmed softly.

"She still is? I was hoping by now..." Sarah sighed.

"Don't worry, dearest, I've assured Dureena that you don't know of her feelings toward me," the Mage exclaimed, while he continued palpating her abdomen. "I think we've got the problem fixed. Once I get off the table, I'll need to talk to you two about what's going to happen next."

Dureena was still sleeping, covered by a sheet, and the Picasso's and Van Gogh's had been placed back on the wall with a negligent wave of Alwyn's hand. Meanwhile, Jaysen still slept, and Vya was staring in amazement at the baby who was gently being rocked in the air.

"Here's the plan. When she wakes up, she's going to be... a little hungry." Sarah gave a rather embarrassed grin.

"Hungry?" Ilas asked.

"Insatiable," Alwyn smirked. "That's where the two of you are going to satisfy her... repeatedly, if necessary. It shouldn't take too long, as the ova have been stimulated to their peak, and they're just waiting to meet up with some sperm. You'd better grab something to eat and drink before we wake her, as Dureena's going to be rather... demanding until she conceives."

"We'll watch Vya, and you three go have some fun." Sarah giggled. "Call us if you need help."

Max stared at the naked woman on the dining table before turning to Ilas. "We are NOT doing it on the table! Those damn Technomages are Philistines, every one of them! Does that old lecher have any idea how much that table cost? And it's not just the cost, that's a work of art, a precious piece of Earth heritage..."

As the linguist rambled, Ilas strengthened her arms and lifted the sleeping form from the table. Max immediately started examining the surface for damage. He ignored the eyebrow Alwyn raised in his direction and carried on as if the Technomage wasn't present. "If I find a single scratch in the varnish, I'm going to sue. I'll call Magnusson and get him to start proceedings. Does Alwyn have no appreciation of beauty? That's a magnificent piece of wood, shipped all the way from Earth..."

Ilas interrupted him. "Max?"

The man from IPX straightened to look at his two partners. "Yes?"

"Shut up. Unless you're so concerned about your damned table that you're not willing to help me with Dureena. If you're not, let me know. I'll ask Alwyn to help us out. I've never had a Mage as a lover before. I wonder if it's true what they say about Mages."

"Oh yes, it is," Sarah admitted with a lecherous grin. "The size of the staff..."

"Sarah, don't give away all my trade secrets please."

Max began sputtering, for the first time in his life at a complete loss for words.

"Alwyn? Would you mind terribly? Jaysen's such a beautiful baby, and you do have the nicest color eyes. I'm partial to blue eyes, especially in my lovers." Ilas gave Sarah and Alwyn a quick wink that Max couldn't see. "Though it might seem odd with Dureena's coloring."

"Sarah?" Alwyn gave her a hopeful look.

"Go right ahead, Alwyn. It's for Dureena, after all."

"No!" Max finally exclaimed.

"No what?" Sarah asked sincerely, in an obviously counterfeit voice.

Ilas looked appraisingly at Max as she lowered Dureena to the triple King size bed they'd had built in their bedroom. "Strip!"

Max raised his eyebrows. Ilas could be blunt when she wanted something, but she wasn't usually *that* direct. He listened as Ilas went on. "You like that shirt, don't you? Well, Dureena is coming round and if she's anything like as... hungry... as Alwyn and Sarah implied, that shirt won't last seconds. You'd better be grateful that Alwyn had her naked already. At least we know she can't have any knives hidden anywhere." The little shape shifter paused, "Well, I don't *think* she can."

Max took the point and stripped quickly, sliding into bed next to the now rousing Dureena. He felt his cock twitch at the sight of her naked breasts, the most beautiful breasts in the universe as far as he was concerned. The linguist dwelt briefly on the memory of the unforgettable occasion when Ilas had shifted into the form of another Dureena. She had lain beneath him as he slid his stiff cock back and forth between those stunning globes, while the real Dureena knelt in front of him as he devoured her nipples with his hands and mouth. Just the memory brought him instantly erect. Which was just as well, because Dureena was now awake and eyeing him hungrily.

"Alwyn, thank you for helping Dureena, even though you knew she's... uncomfortable around you. Do you think that one day my friends will accept me being involved with you?" Sarah rested her head on her lover's shoulder, and Alwyn gently touched her face, refusing to answer that question.

Max was panting hard as Dureena rode his cock, plunging up and down, her breasts bouncing, demanding the touch of his hands and mouth. He could feel himself deep inside her, the tip of his cock rubbing against the thief's ovary, stimulating the production of the ova. Unlike human women, in female Zanderi the cervix opened to allow full penetration by the neuter's shaft.

As Max sat up to suck on Dureena's nipples, he saw Ilas move in behind her. The shape-shifter was now in Zanderi male form, and her mating tentacles were primed and ready for action. One by one they slipped into each opening in the Zanderi woman's back, insinuating themselves along the passages lubricated by Dureena's arousal.

The linguist groaned as the first of the tentacles wrapped itself around the head of his cock, buried deep inside the thief. That tentacle was held just under the ovary, ready to ejaculate as soon as the ovum was expelled. The other tentacles positioned themselves around the place where the ovum would emerge, stroking Dureena's deep, dark core and squeezing the head of Max's cock. Max, Ilas and Dureena exploded into orgasm together, Max coming with a violence he hadn't achieved for some time, Dureena's internal muscles clamping down around his cock, her thighs squeezing his hips as she expelled her ovum straight into the path of Ilas' tentacles. The shape shifter's orgasm shot viable sperm directly at the fertile egg, as the three partners screamed their ecstasy and collapsed.

Max lay on his back, gasping for air, groaning quietly under the weight of the two women lying on top of him. Dureena didn't weigh too heavily, but Ilas wasn't light in any form she took. He was just about to ask them to move when there was quiet knock on the door.

The man from IPX ran through all the languages he knew and dozens of variations of phraseology, before arriving at the most pertinent words.

"FUCK OFF!"

Sarah chuckled quietly as she entered the bedroom, watching Max grab for a sheet to cover his modesty. "I've seen it all before, Max. Don't worry on my account."

Max drew himself up in the bed. "Well, you certainly haven't seen this one before and as far as I'm concerned, long may that continue." Sarah could see that Max was feeling somewhat vulnerable. He may well be used to being naked with two women around, but three was getting a bit much for him.

The doctor sat on the side of the bed and looked closely at Dureena. "How do you feel?"

Dureena's golden eyes flashed with fire. "Again. I want to do it again!"

Sarah ran her scanner over Dureena's belly as Max groaned. "Sorry, Max, no luck this time. Time for

round two."

Max stared in dismay at Sarah's back as she left the room. "Round two?" He turned to Dureena, whose eyes were filled with lust, and Ilas, who had retained her male Zanderi shape. "No way. Not a chance. I'll need at least another hour before I can..."

His words trailed off as Dureena's mouth descended to lick his softened cock, and Ilas shifted between his legs and started to suck his balls. Max groaned as he felt himself stiffening again. "OK, maybe not an hour, but this is it ladies. After this time it'll be at least a week before..."

He was interrupted by a deep voice emerging from between his thighs.

"Shut up, Max."

"Did you just hear someone scream for help? It might be time for you to go check on them again." Alwyn said. "Don't let on that it'll take a few tries to get her pregnant. I think she deserves the wildest time of her life, don't you?"

"Alwyn. How long do you think it'll take?" Sarah asked breathlessly.

"Few more hours." The Mage suddenly gave his partner a look full of promise. "Sarah, you're such a wanton. Are you getting turned on by what's going on behind that door?"

"Mmm... I might be," she admitted.

"Well, the children are both asleep, and they won't be awake for hours, I promise. So hurry up! Give them the good news and get back here quickly."

"How about on the table, just because it would upset Maximilian?" Sarah grinned mischievously.

"Are you SURE?" asked a male voice plaintively.

Sarah shook her head sadly as she scanned Dureena's belly again. "I'm sorry." She ignored the groan that emerged from under the sheet where Max was curled up, hiding. "But I think I know what the problem is. You have to stop Max ejaculating. The acidity of his semen is killing the Zanderi sperm."

Ilas gave a deep chuckle and swatted Max's behind. "Always said you were acid, but I thought it was your mouth, not your cock."

The linguist's voice emerged from under the sheet. "Not again, I can't do it again."

Sarah stood and patted his shoulder, "Come on Max, one last time. Cry God for Maxie, Mars and IPX."

As she turned to leave the room, Max's head shot out from under the sheet. "Mangling Shakespeare

isn't going to help!" Sarah turned just in time to see him duck back under the covers and curl up again.

"Come on now, Max, we have a plan." Max didn't move. He'd wrapped the sheet tightly about him and was sulking. [Don't these women know anything about performance anxiety? I'm exhausted!]

There was a tearing sound as the tip of one of Dureena's knives slid through the sheet and slit it open. Before Max knew it, he was staring up into a pair of flashing yellow eyes. He whimpered, "Tomorrow? Can't we do it again tomorrow?"

Dureena shook her head. "I'm ready right now, and until that little egg is fertilized, I won't be satisfied." Her grin struck pure terror into the linguist's heart and balls. He tried not to think about his balls. They felt like little shriveled sacks between his legs, and he wasn't sure that they were ever going to recover.

A voice Max half recognized spoke. It wasn't the deep Zanderi male voice. It was lighter than that but still familiar. "What's always been one of your deepest, darkest fantasies, Max? I've known about it for a while now. Well, today it's going to come true." Max looked over Dureena's shoulder, into his own piercing blue eyes. Ilas had shifted into another Max, broad shoulders, golden haired chest, slight potbelly and all. But there was one significant difference between the shape shifter, and the man lying prone on the bed. Ilas' cock was raring to go. From where Max lay, it looked as stiff as a Maypole and twice as big.

He shook his head and tried not to whine as he said, "How's that going to help? Dureena needs you to be the Zanderi male, not the neuter."

Ilas smiled, a smile Max recognized as his own, but it still scared the hell out of him. She looked down at her stiff cock then back up at the linguist again. "Oh, this isn't for Dureena. This is for you."

Before he knew what was happening, Max had been rolled onto his stomach by the two women, and he felt a large hand [my hand!] massaging his balls. Then two hands shifted to his shoulders and pulled him up until he was kneeling on all fours. Max sighed and resigned himself to his fate. It was his own fault after all. Falling in love with a shape shifter and a thief was bound to lead to disaster.

The large hand continued to massage his balls, while the thumb of that hand slowly circled his anus, pressing gently against it. Max gasped out, "Lubricant! For god's sake use some lubricant, or Dureena won't be the only one Sarah has to treat!"

He heard Ilas give his own deep chuckle, and a moment later, a lubricated finger slipped into him. Max gasped in pain and pleasure as the finger slowly circled inside him, pressing against his prostate gland. To his total amazement, Max felt his cock twitching, reviving under this stimulation. Then he watched as Dureena slid under him and took his slowly stiffening cock into her mouth. At the same moment, a second finger slipped inside him.

Max balanced on a knife-edge of pleasure and pain. The stretching of his sphincter gave him exquisite pain, while Dureena's mouth gave such pleasure it almost hurt. Then just when the man from IPX thought he could stand no more, the fingers withdrew and he felt what he knew to be his own cock pushing into him.

[If all those people who've told me to go fuck myself could see me now...]

Coherent thought vanished under the double assault on his cock and his ass, waves of pleasure building until the orgasm he'd thought impossible was only seconds away. It was right then that Dureena slipped the ring over his cock and balls and drew it tight.

Max howled in dismay. He needed to come and he needed to come NOW, but with that damnable toy clamping down on him, he knew he couldn't. The linguist was screaming his protests in English, Zanderi and the nearest approximation to Ilas' native language that he could manage, but his partners weren't listening. Strong hands turned Max onto his back, and he watched as Dureena lowered herself onto him.

She leaned forward and kissed him gently as she started to thrust up and down. Max could see the tears in her eyes as she looked down at him. "I'm sorry, Max. We'll make it up to you soon, but this is necessary. Please forgive me."

Max saw all the pain and needing in Dureena's eyes and lifted his hand to caress her face. "Nothing to forgive. Do what you have to."

Sarah's smile lit up the room. "YES!"

She watched as Ilas, now back in her usual blue form, threw herself across the bed at Dureena, hugging the little thief fiercely. Sarah spoke quickly, "Hey! Go steady there! Dureena will have to rest and take it easy all the way through this pregnancy. No rough housing."

The doctor almost laughed aloud as Ilas suddenly sat back looking contrite. "Sorry! We'll take good care of her, won't we, Max?"

Sarah turned to look at the linguist, who was lying back against the pillows smiling, the torn sheet drawn up to the middle of his chest, tented above his groin by his still upright cock.

"Sure we'll take care of her. But would someone now please take care of me?" Max looked down at the tented sheet and smiled, pathetically.

Sarah laughed as Dureena and Ilas both pounced on him and she beat a hasty retreat to the sound of tearing sheets.

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"John," Matthew spoke to his XO, "It's time for you to go kill the fatted calf again."

"I'm just so glad that I decided to start putting fatted calf on the requisition orders, as we seem to be serving it every second Tuesday now. Fortunately, I have also stockpiled mustard just in case that dragon of Alwyn's decides to turn it into a towering inferno again. Who's it for? Sheridan? Delenn? General so and so?" John flashed his superior officer a rather impudent smile.

"No. Dureena and her family, and I've been told to expect Alwyn, Sarah and Jaysen as well."

"Regular family reunion we have going on here. We haven't seen them in a while, not since Jaysen was born. What's the occasion?"

John's easy grin faded, when he noticed that his Captain was looking serious.

"Dureena's pregnant."

"Really? Ilas didn't tell Lily. I'll have to tease her about her sister keeping secrets. When is she due?"

"Sometime next week."

That tidbit of information rattled John. "On second thoughts, maybe I'd better not tell Lily that. Is there a particular reason why they decided to keep it a secret?"

"Sarah got a little graphic with me, but apparently it hasn't been the easiest pregnancy on record, and Dureena was and is still terrified that something will go wrong. They've put Dureena on bed rest for the last two months, and there's something else..." Matt sighed, wishing that he didn't have to break the news.

"What?"

"They, being Alwyn and Sarah, who are the obstetricians in this, specifically don't want Angel or Galen anywhere near her. They're afraid that seeing them will remind Dureena about what happened to her first baby."

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed."

John was quiet for a bit, which Matthew knew meant that his XO was thinking deep thoughts. Therefore he wasn't surprised when John suddenly spoke up. "Matthew?"

"Yes?"

"Alwyn's not going to be raising the dead again during Dureena's delivery, is he? If he is, I'd appreciate some warning."

John left soon afterwards, and Matthew began wondering when his ship had been commandeered and turned into a birthing clinic. It wasn't that he didn't like seeing his old friends, but sometimes, he found it rather expensive to keep buying baby presents, especially on a Starship's Captain's limited paycheck.

"Fortunately, I have a rich, older wife."

That jest didn't cheer him like it normally did, as even an expensive gift wouldn't make up for the damage he had unintentionally inflicted on his favorite thief. But for Dureena, and all that she had suffered due to a certain demon Box he used to carry around, well, Matthew vowed that he'd do something extra special for her little girl. Sarah had told him that Dureena especially wanted him present when she gave birth.

The Captain had found himself extremely emotional, when Sarah had repeatedly reassured him that Dureena really wanted him there. Matthew had been sure that he should have been banished to the annex with Angel and Galen, the other undesirables, while the rest of his extended family ate the fatted calf in the main room.

Hell, he shouldn't even be on the same ship when Dureena and her family celebrated. Not after all he had done.

It was all his fault, what had happened to Angel, what had happened to Dureena, and most importantly, what had happened to her unborn child.

"Now, what do I give a little girl with a parent who's one of the richest men in the galaxy? How about her first set of lock picking tools?" It would be a sentimental gift, to represent how often her mother's skills at thievery had helped him during the quest for the Cure. Including the night she'd broken into Deborah's bedroom for him, allowing him to heal the rift that had existed between them at that time, before it could widen irreparably.

Dureena would appreciate it, he was sure, and maybe gaining Dureena's approval would make it easier for him to sleep at night. No. It would never be enough, but it would be a start, a pitiful attempt at cleaning the unborn child's blood off his hands.

Returning to his quarters, Matthew found his wife and her sister chatting easily among themselves.

"Matthew, what's the problem? You feel... down." Deborah smiled at him, and for a moment, Matthew wished that he could lie and say it was nothing.

Nothing. Yeah. Right. Well, one of the problems with being married to an empath was that lying wasn't really an option.

"There's some good news... and some bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Good news." His wife insisted. "I don't want to hear the bad."

"Dureena's pregnant."

"That's wonderful. She must be so happy. When is she due?"

"Next week."

"Ilas didn't mention it when we last talked. Wait, what's the bad news? Is there a problem? Is that why she didn't tell us?" Gideon could feel Deborah's wave of concern.

"It's been a rather rough pregnancy for her. Sarah got a little too technical for my liking, but it appears that when what happened... happened..." Damning himself for a coward, and not being brave enough to simply say 'When Buck took the child's life', Gideon continued, "There was a significant amount of scar tissue. Sarah and Alwyn repaired what they could, but it's not been easy for Dureena and her partners."

"She nearly lost this baby a couple of months ago," For a moment, his eyes filled with tears,

remembering Dureena's overwhelming grief and rage after the loss of her first child, and he could imagine how she had reacted to nearly going through it all over again. "And that brought everything back... HARD." Deborah stood and moved towards him, so Gideon opened his arms and held her tightly to him, drawing comfort that he knew he didn't deserve from her warmth and love. He kissed her forehead, before he continued.

"Dureena wants to have the baby among her family and friends, which is why she's coming here, but she has a few requests. Max has agreed wholeheartedly with her, and while Ilas understood why Dureena wants certain things... Well, Ilas wasn't happy, so their relationship is a little strained right now."

"What are the requests?" Deborah asked. Gideon looked at Angel, sitting curled up on their couch, listening carefully.

"Dureena doesn't want either Galen or me near her, does she?" Angel softly commented. "Because when she looks at us, she can't forget what I unintentionally did to her and how Galen... did what he did."

Matthew nodded.

Deborah sat holding Angel in her arms as her younger sister sobbed. Stroking Angel's hair, Deborah looked over her head at Matthew who leaned against the dining table with his arms crossed, feeling unhappy.

"This is cruel, Matthew. If they don't want Angel to be here, then they shouldn't come here. This is her home now."

Gideon shook his head, knowing that his wife would pick up his mixed feelings on the subject. "And it was Max and Dureena's home for a long time, too. Look, Deborah, I don't like this any more than you do, but Dureena needs to be somewhere she feels safe and secure. She wants Sarah and Luke to look after her during the delivery, and she wants me to stand in the place of her father. How can I refuse that?"

Gideon watched as Deborah's eyes filled with tears. "You can't. Of course you can't. But I can! If Dureena doesn't want Angel present when her baby's born, then I won't be there either. And I suspect that Lily will feel just as strongly about this. I will NOT have my sister hurt like this! And what about Ilas? Why shouldn't she be allowed to have all her sisters around her when she's about to become a father for the first time!"

By now the Captain could feel the waves of anger and sorrow his wife was projecting, but had no idea how to calm her down or change her feelings. And he was still struggling with Deborah's last sentence. ['... when *she's* about to become a *father..?*' How the hell did I end up with a family where that sentence makes sense?] But he had to try.

"Deborah, listen to me. She is not having the entire family around when she gives birth. There will be no dead lovers from years gone by, no newborn dragons with eighteen other people and a marching band playing the Stars and Stripes forever. Among her people, when it's time for the woman to give birth, she and her parents are present. Plus the doctor. No one else. No sisters, or brothers, or other members of the family."

"She's asking that Angel not be part of the delivery team. She's requested Alwyn, and she's asked for Luke. Sarah and I have been officially designated as her parents, because she has no one else. Dureena's just asking that Angel and Ilas and Galen and the rest of the family go out carousing, but for now, she doesn't want Angel and Galen anywhere near her. After what happened to her, it's really not that much to ask." He sighed deeply. "It's not surprising at all. The only surprising thing is that she asked me to be the father figure. I figured she would have asked John, after what happened."

Gideon could see that his wife was about to answer back, when Angel started to struggle in Deborah's arms and pushed away from her sister's hold. "Stop it! I don't want you two fighting over this!" The younger woman wiped the tears from her face and sniffed loudly. "Dureena has every right to feel this way. I might not have known what I was doing, but I did help Lucas kill her child. It was incredibly kind and generous of Dureena to help get me out of that jail on Mars, I have no right to expect anything more from her."

Angel looked up at her older sister and tried to smile. It was weak but a brave attempt. "I understand why Dureena wouldn't want me around for the birth. It would bring back horrible memories for her. But you and Lily must be there, for Dureena and for Ilas. I'm a big girl now, Demon. You have to stop trying to protect me." Angel reached up to touch her sister's face in gratitude.

Gideon watched, sighing with relief as Deborah hugged Angel tightly again and turned to him. "OK, I'll do whatever you need me to do, and I'll do my best to understand Dureena, but you can tell Max to keep well clear of me. I'm going to be mad with someone in that family, and as it can't be Dureena or Ilas, then he's it!"

Gideon laughed gently and walked across the room to hug both women as they sat on the sofa. "Be my guest. And if Angel wants to cast any spells to turn Max into a frog, I won't have a word to say about it. It'll be one rung up the evolutionary ladder from where he is right now anyway."

Gideon was on the bridge going over the latest crew evaluation reports, when the officer at communications turned in her seat. "We're being hailed, Captain."

The Captain nodded. "I'm expecting Alwyn. He's bringing Dr. Chambers and the Eilerson ménage."

Lt. Khan shook her head. "It's not Alwyn, Captain. It's Galen."

"Shit."

Gideon had hoped that the Technomage would do one of his vanishing acts for long enough that his presence or absence at Dureena's confinement wouldn't be an issue. No such luck. "Put him on screen."

The hooded image of Galen appeared on the large screen at the front of the bridge. The Technomage looked cheerful for once as he spoke. "I hear that you're about to have a happy event on the Excalibur, but my invitation seems to have been misdirected. I've packed the party hats and pink baby booties, so clear me for landing, I'm coming in."

The Captain winced. "I'll meet you in the landing bay, Galen. I have something I need to tell you." The screen went blank and Gideon stood. He wondered just how angry Galen would be and how many holes an angry Technomage could punch in the Excalibur's hull.

Gideon had programmed the bullet car to circle the ship, until he ordered it to stop. It was the only way he could be sure that he got some privacy with Galen, while he broke the news. He'd just hoped that the Technomage's reaction didn't make the damned thing jump the tracks.

The Captain watched Galen closely. Having just told Galen that he wasn't going to be the prodigal son at the party, in fact he was the leper and outcast, Gideon was counting down to the explosion. The Technomage's face was unreadable, nearly as frozen as Deborah at her most controlled.

The silence lengthened so Gideon decided to fill it. "It's not just you, Galen. I'm afraid that Dureena's attitude toward Angel is about the same as MacBeth to Banquo's ghost. I'm sorry."

Galen turned and raised one eyebrow. "That's a little harsh. Angel had no idea what she was doing. I wish I could say the same." The Technomage sighed deeply. "I had hoped that Dureena had forgiven me. Apparently I was wrong. Very well, I will stay long enough to ensure that Alwyn does not require my assistance then leave." He gave Gideon a twisted smile. "But I'm afraid that I'm going to have to leave the set of Zanderi throwing knives with Alwyn. Maybe he can convince Dureena to take the gift for her daughter. Don't worry, Matthew, I don't plan to start throwing a fit of temper or a brace of fireballs. Your ship is safe."

Gideon sat back in his seat and looked seriously at Galen. "Well, that's a relief, but I'd like to know that my friend is fine too."

Galen nodded. "I'll live."

Gideon was drifting into sleep, when the quiet words roused him.

"I'm sorry."

He tightened his arm around Deborah's shoulders, as she lay with her head on his shoulder and her arm across his chest. "What for?"

Deborah sighed and turned her head to kiss his chest. "I was totally out of order about Dureena. I was unreasonable and irrational, and I'm sorry. I promise I'll welcome Dureena into our home as she deserves."

Gideon kissed the top of his wife's head. "Thank you. What about Max?"

"Fuck Max."

The Captain chuckled quietly. "Do I have to? He's really not my type."

The three sisters left the landing bay in a huddle, all talking at once, with Ilas in the center of the group. Gideon knew that they were headed directly for Angel's quarters to be with their other sister, who had been absent from the party welcoming Alwyn's ship. The Captain glanced across the landing bay to where Galen's ship was just visible behind a group of fighters. No doubt Galen was hiding

inside.

Deborah and Lily had greeted Dureena with warmth and kindness, doing everything they could to make her feel comfortable, before turning their attention to their youngest sister and whisking her away. When they had gone, Gideon turned back to Dureena.

"I've had your old quarters fitted out for you again, just how you like them, nice and small. Max will just have to duck."

Dureena laughed, and Gideon thought he'd never heard a sound that pleased him more. The little thief looked impossibly round, but fit and healthy. Maybe this time, everything would be all right. Max stood next to Dureena and looked quizzically after the sisters.

"Was it my imagination, or was there a certain chill in the greeting I just received? What did I do?"

Gideon shook his head. "Deborah and Lily are a bit peeved that no one told them about the baby," he lied fluently, "so they've decided that it's your fault. You're the only man in the family, so it must be you. You seem to have pissed off the witches, Max, so maybe you should hide your ruby slippers and watch out for low flying monkeys."

Max muttered something about going back to Kansas as Gideon turned to greet Alwyn and Sarah. Reaching out to shake the Technomage's hand, he said, "I guess that makes you the Wizard. How was Emerald City the last time you visited?"

Alwyn smiled back at the Captain. "Green." The Technomage lifted Sarah's hand to his mouth and kissed it, grinning at Gideon. "May I present Glinda, the good witch?"

Gideon chuckled and kissed Sarah Chambers on the cheek. "I hope you brought your wand, Glinda, we may need some good magic round here."

Sarah laughed. "We did better than that, we brought Alwyn's staff. If I'm the good witch, which character are you playing, Matt?"

The Captain raised his eyebrows. "Isn't it obvious? I'm the cowardly lion. And over there," he pointed to where John Matheson and Luke Raven stood, "we have the Tin Man and the Scarecrow. Luke can't have a brain if he agreed to take over your old job, and I know damned well that John is totally heartless. He keeps dumping all the ship's paperwork on me."

Ignoring Matheson's outraged spluttering, Gideon started to lead them all out of the landing bay, as Dureena pleaded with Max to tell her what the hell they were all going on about. The Captain heard Max's words as they entered the bullet car.

"Never mind. Just be glad that you're a bit too tall to be cast as a Munchkin."

The group had taken John's suggestion, and decided to have the birth celebration in his quarters.

"Might as well, we don't have anything breakable anymore, not with all the kids," John had casually remarked.

It was an odd celebration, conspicuous in who was missing from the group. Matthew, Sarah, Luke and Alwyn were going to be presiding over the birth; Galen and Angel were still keeping out of sight, so that left John and the rest with an abundance of small children everywhere.

Jaysen, being the youngest, was sleeping on one of the beds, with Ishtar curled protectively next to him. The miniature dragon had one wing covering him, appearing to be dozing as well, until someone stepped too close to the bed, and then her magenta eyes opened slightly, as though in silent warning.

Max and Ilas sat close together on the sofa, with Vya sitting on Max's knee, any strain between the couple apparently healed. Ilas held baby Naima, while Demon sat on the floor with her long legs stretched out in front of her. Marcus sat between them, facing his mother, as she read him a story. Lily sat to the side of her sister holding Faylinn in her arms, while John sat on a chair opposite, with Dasha on his knee. All the children were listening to the story Demon was reading, and all seemed unusually subdued, catching the mood of the adults in the room.

Matthew Gideon

In all my years as a starship Captain, I've been involved in many odd things. I've had fistfights with a few bad guys, got arrested for solicitation with John (but we were asking about the Cure, honestly, General!), and even had a super sized space jellyfish humping my ship. In my private life, I've been put in a birthing chair while the mother of my child delivered our son, and even witnessed the wonders of a dragon giving birth. And I'm not saying which one of those two babies was the cuter newborn, but...

But this was really bizarre.

Dureena grabbed my hand HARD, and for a moment, I felt like warning my 'daughter' that she was perilously close to breaking my fingers.

Yes, apparently I now had a fully-grown daughter in labor, which meant three things. First, I was technically going to be a granddad! Second, Sarah was grandma, and third--the one thing I was having the biggest problem swallowing--Eilerson was now a relative.

I get rid of the guy finally, and he ends up involved with my daughter. I thought about going out and breaking a few bones for him getting my daughter pregnant and then forgetting to mention it to me. As far as I knew, Mr. Eilerson still hadn't made an honest woman of her, so I was tempted to find an antique shotgun, just to remind him of a few things.

If Dureena was my daughter, that made Max my son-in-law and Ilas my daughter-in-law. Which meant Deborah was Ilas and Max's mother-in-law. That one made me smile. Talk about having a Demon for a mother-in-law. But in that case, Deborah was her own sister's mother-in-law and grandmother to her own nephew. My brain curled up and died at that point. I have no idea how the hell this family works, but I'm damned sure that someone's committing incest!

"Breathe, dearest daughter," I mumbled in the language of Dureena's people. What I really wanted to say was "CAREFUL! YOU'RE GOING TO BREAK MY HAND!"

"That accent is abominable," snapped Alwyn.

"I'm a Captain, not a linguist!" That was hotly retorted in English.

"Calm down," Sarah told me, ignoring the fact that her Technomage-mate was the one who was harping on about my accent.

Dureena screamed again, and Alwyn began ignoring me as he conversed quietly with Luke.

Luke Raven

"She's never going to be able to have another child, and there's no way in hell that she should have been able to carry this child to term," I whispered to Alwyn. "What the hell did you do? Rebuild her piece by piece? Knit everything together part by part? Does she have any idea that you've been Technomagicking this entire pregnancy?"

"I decided to fulfill her greatest desire." Alwyn answered shortly. "And you'd better decide to keep your suspicions to yourself."

The veiled warning hung in the air, and I suddenly looked at the Mage. Alwyn was looking a little tired, and his normally whimsical mood had disappeared to parts unknown. He was almost waspish, and some of the comments the Mage had come out with made me do a quick double take, to make sure that Eilerson hadn't suddenly taken over the Mage's body.

Then Dureena gasped in pain again, and we quickly looked at the screens and flickering visions above Dureena's belly.

"Fetal heart rate is dropping." Alwyn announced softly. "Sarah, we're going to have to do a crash Cesarean."

Matthew Gideon

"Dureena. We mentioned to you that we might have to do a Cesarean section," Sarah soothingly explained to Dureena.

"Is there a problem?" My daughter grabbed my hand tighter, and I began trying to relax her.

"The baby's probably too big." I lied, knowing full well that we had just hit crisis mode big time. Dureena believed me, not realizing that after all my years as a Starship Captain, and long nights at the poker table, I could lie rather smoothly, even to my daughter.

"You'll stay? Won't you? You won't leave me?" Dureena asked me repeatedly.

"Oh, of course I'll stay. Not even the Drakh could drag me away." I assured her, while inside I was feeling moderately queasy. C-SECTION? The medics would be slicing, cutting and cauterizing right in front of me, and honestly, I hated watching field surgery. Even though I'm sure it would be neater in an Operating Suite aboard the Excalibur, I'm a little squeamish when it comes to seeing the insides of people I care for. If I don't like the person, well, it's no big deal to me that their insides are on public display, but Dureena was my daughter!

The three medics had warned me that they might have to proceed with Plan B, and I knew why it was necessary.

My dear ancestor, Lucas (may he rot in the depths of hell) and his return had killed Dureena's first child, and the way it had been done had pretty much destroyed Dureena's chance of ever having another baby. My ancestor and my Apocalypse Box had wreaked havoc and that was the source of my never-ending guilt.

When the news of Dureena's pregnancy had reached Luke Raven, he had appeared startled.

"You're sure?"

"Yes," I assured him.

"There's no way that you could have heard wrong?" He'd asked again. For some reason, he had appeared to need confirmation of the happy news.

"Luke, Sarah told me. She says that it's going to be a little girl, so it'll balance out the sexes of all our children a bit better. Three girls, four boys. Why don't you believe me?" I was curious over Luke's less than enthusiastic response to the news.

"Dureena's sterile. She can't be pregnant, there's no way in hell that she should be pregnant."

"What?" I motioned him to move over a private corner so we could chat, while the rest of our extended family shared the good news.

"There was too much damage from the miscarriage. There should be adhesions and scar tissue in such quantity that it would be impossible for her to get pregnant."

We looked at each other, and suddenly Luke looked a little sick.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, my good goddess," he swore. There was a look in his eyes that Luke saved for use only when he was dealing with two particular people. It was like a small animal trapped in the oncoming lights of a speeding land cruiser.

"ALWYN!" We exclaimed together.

"He's showing up, isn't he? That damned Technomage who likes raising the dead and running around with that crazy mustard-charring familiar of his. He wasn't happy just getting Sarah pregnant, now DUREENA is."

I had noticed a distinct shift in my extended family's attitude toward the Mage after the birth of Jaysen. Originally, we had all been fooled by his harmless, eccentric, grandfatherly Technomage act, and then when he'd neatly dropped thirty odd years off his façade and impregnated Sarah, the attitude was one of stunned disbelief.

During the birth of his son, he'd decided to invite someone who had apparently been dead for centuries to join the party. Look, I don't believe in ghosts, but let's just say in the case of Paedrig T. Technomage, I'm having some serious doubts. Right now, the family's attitude toward Alwyn was, "Keep him on

that side of the Galaxy, we'll be on the opposite side and everything will be just fine."

Deborah told me that he was still a dear sweet man, but I was going to treat him like a berserker in the days of yore. Useful in emergencies, but you're never quite sure what he was going to do next, and there's always the chance that he'll take down half of the good guys with him. Accidentally, of course.

Enough of the day dreams, you've got work to do, Grand-daddy Gideon.

"Inhale," Sarah began putting Dureena to sleep, and I began smoothing her sweaty hair.

"I'm scared." My daughter needed comforting, and I began to whisper quietly to her to go to sleep.

"When you wake up, you'll have a beautiful baby girl."

Luke Raven

It was damned weird working with a Mage Medic, and I wondered if I could write a paper on it. Might be good for the career, after all. Head doctor on the good ship Excalibur, and here I was working with a Technomage.

I had asked him if he was planning on raising the Dead for this delivery, and the Mage had shot me a look of pure unadulterated evil.

"Just wondering," I'd answered.

It wasn't going to be the standard Cesarean Section, as the scar tissue and adhesions were going to make everything bloody difficult. I'd have to go through layer upon layer. Carefully, I cut her skin, trying to leave the smallest of incisions. While a skin regenerator would leave Dureena with no external scars, it was a matter of professional pride.

"Cautery," I called, and Alwyn provided it, in a flashy Technomagical way. It just wasn't natural to have him run his finger over the blood to cauterize it. "Suction." That was Sarah's job, and thankfully she was doing it the old fashioned way. What can I say? I'm a purist.

"Fetal heart rate is stabilizing." Sarah advised me.

"Wonderful. Let's see if she's as pretty as her mom," I replied. "But, we don't need to tell Lily I said that, please."

We had been working together for some time, I'm not sure how long, because I've noticed that time for me runs oddly. Just fast enough for me to get the job done, and then later on, I realize that I've spent several hours on something that for me has passed in mere moments.

We were still slicing and dicing, as I disrespectfully call it, knee deep in the most delicate part of the operation, when suddenly there was a sound of something falling, the shattering of breaking glass, and the scream of a dragon. There was a flash of something gold in the air, and it nearly took Matt out.

"What the hell?" Gideon yelled.

"We've lost the damn sterile field, Sarah. What's going on?" I asked her.

"Alwyn's collapsed." Sarah's voice was a careful monotone, the type I referred to as the 'Regretfully, I most inform you that while the operation was a success, the patient died' voice. "I..." There was a tremor in her voice that she quickly suppressed, once again becoming the professional she was. "I don't think he's breathing."

"CODE 99 STAT OPERATING ROOM 1. CODE 99 STAT OPERATING ROOM 1. CODE 99 STAT OPERATING ROOM 1." Sarah began yelling that loudly, and I heard the sound of a code being called overhead. No doubt my family was going to be terrified by that news, but I had a baby to deliver.

Sarah then walked over to where her lover was lying on the floor, and she proceeded to step over his prone figure without so much as a downward glance. Matthew was on the floor next to Alwyn, pounding on his chest and trying to breathe for him, but it was obvious to me that he didn't think his Technomagical CPR was doing one bit of good.

Quick Luke! Think! What's the voltage for Technomage defibrillation? 200? 300? 360? I was drawing a complete blank--they never mentioned Technomages in Medical School. They mentioned Narn! And Centauri! And Drazi, oh my! But nothing about MAGES!

"One and two and three and four and five..." Matthew was counting his chest compressions out loud, and then he gave two long, slow breaths. The Mage's chest rose and fell, but Alwyn's face was ashen. There was a noise in the background, and I suddenly wondered what was going wrong now.

"Cautery." Sarah called out while she began to cauterize the bleed. "Suction." Her voice was calm, cool and professional but her eyes were shattered.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Doctor. You have a baby to deliver and a patient on the table who takes priority." Sarah reminded me, calmly, as though the father of her child wasn't lying behind her. "I'm detecting a noticeable drop in her blood pressure."

"We need a third, Sarah."

"I'm here." I heard a voice, and saw that Angel was in scrubs. I saw a flash of black leather from the corner of my eye, and realized that Galen had joined Matt next to the fallen Mage. He was grabbing the older man and dragging him out of the OR. I heard the hustle of a code team assembling, and I hoped that Alwyn wouldn't die. Not now, not during what was suppose to be a joyous event.

A voice in the back of my mind was remarking that what I was hearing was not an imminent disaster, but the sound of a dragon crooning.

"We need more fluids. Ringers Lactate IV, run it wide. I want the whole blood we prepped ready for transfusion." Sarah called.

"We'll need a few more antibiotics hung also, as no doubt she's going to get a wicked staph infection." Angel remarked dryly.

"We need a temporary sterile field set up again." I ordered.

"Done, Galen's already sealed one." Angel remarked. "Damned smart dragon, I have to admit. She grabbed Galen by his ear and dragged him down here. It was such an unusual sight that I decided to tag along, as I thought it probably meant something was happening."

"Something always does," Sarah commented.

"Sarah? What's going on?" I asked again, while the three of us continued to stabilize Dureena. "Angel, more suction, please."

"Alwyn's exhausted. He knew that there was a strong chance that this would happen since he's been--how did you put it?--Technomagicking her pregnancy since she conceived." Sarah's voice softened. "Damnable fool. Alwyn felt sorry for her, having her fill of pain and sorrow, and the one thing she wanted got ripped away from her. He didn't warn me this could happen until a few days ago." For a moment, her eyes filled with tears, and Sarah suddenly snarled. "Enough. We've got a baby to deliver. Matthew? Are you still standing upright?"

"Yes. As long as there aren't any more dragons dive-bombing into here, I should be fine."

"No. There shouldn't be." Sarah said.

There was the sound of a scuffle outside the room, and Matthew suddenly sighed. "Looks like the family's shown up to find out what's going on. Max is trying to restrain Ilas, and Deborah's helping."

"When they figure it all out, do you think someone could tell me? I'd appreciate it," I commented dryly. "I've been a little too busy keeping an eye on this problem, to worry about everything else going on, but from what I can gather, it looks like everything has happened, except for a surprise Drakh attack."

Max Eilerson

We first realized something was going wrong with the delivery, when Trace Miller walked in to join our celebration. He was coming through the door, when Ishtar screamed an ungodly sound like bending metal, and the dragon suddenly launched herself from where she had been watching over the sleeping Jaysen. Her eyes were blood red while her claws and wings were fully extended. She escaped through the door at the speed of light and managed to knock Trace down, in her haste to leave the room.

"What the hell?" Trace asked. He was bleeding from one cheek, where Ishtar had clawed him, which surprised me, as Ishtar had always been a well-behaved dragon. Except for the time with the flaming pot of mustard of course, but I was willing to dismiss that as an aberration due to her being pregnant at the time. Trust me, after barely surviving Dureena's pregnancy, the mood swings and her knives, I'm not going to comment on how oddly some females act when pregnant.

That's when we heard the code being called in the OR. I looked at Ilas, then over at John. You could almost hear the mental arithmetic going on in every adult's head in the room and we all arrived at four at the same moment.

Lily yelled, "Leave the children! John and I will look after them." So Ilas hurriedly handed Naima to her mother, while John put Dasha on the floor and took Vya from me.

Demon thrust Marcus into Trace's bewildered arms and shouted, "Stay!" at him. I almost expected Trace to bark, but if he did we didn't hear him, as Ilas, Demon, and I shot out of John's quarters nearly as fast as Ishtar had.

Galen picked up the prone Alwyn, and juggled him carefully. Muttering something, he nodded his head toward where the glass had been broken in the decon room, and there was a sudden flash of violet.

"Sealed. Ishtar, next time I think Matthew would appreciate a warning before you decide to dive-bomb the glass."

Ishtar hissed a comment that I didn't need to be a linguist to translate. Some things rendered into another language still mean 'Fuck Matthew'.

"Get out of my way." Galen ordered. "I need to get him near a conduit. Ishtar, you have my permission to clear a pathway to the nearest one, if they don't start moving in three seconds."

Ishtar's eyes were now flashing, switching from blood red to magenta and back, her claws were flexing in and out of their sheaths and her teeth were fully displayed. She appeared almost a little *too* eager to help disperse the crowd. That's why I was standing with my back to the wall, while trying to keep Ilas under control. Fortunately, Demon was helping, as I never could handle her baby sister on my own.

"You can't help either one of them. CALM DOWN, damn it." I hissed, when Ilas hit me hard in the rib cage.

Galen gently placed the older Mage on a bed, and began gesturing with his hands.

"Warn the bridge, there's going to be a rather noticeable drop in power. Make sure that the OR is on auxiliary power, please. You have exactly five seconds to switch over." Galen's voice was pleasant, as though asking for more sugar in his tea.

"Five... four... three... two... one... CLEAR," he announced loudly. He gave a fluid motion, and then there was a blinding flash in Medbay.

Matthew Gideon

"What the fuck is going on now? Did anyone warn me that they were switching over to auxiliary power?" Luke sighed. "OK. Matthew, get really close. It's almost that time we've been waiting for. You've got the towel to wrap the baby in?"

"Don't drop her, Luke." Sarah warned.

"I will never ever be able to live that fly ball down, will I?"

"No."

"OK... Suction... and... Hello... Beautiful!" Luke laughed.

There was a cry of a baby, and I moved in quickly, with the towel.

"Cutting the cord now..."

I was holding Dureena's baby girl, and realized that once again, I had fallen in love at first sight. Grandpa Matt is a bit of a sentimental fool, but we don't need to tell everyone that, now do we? Spoils my reputation for being heartless.

I was holding her, when I felt the ship rock. Fortunately, I didn't drop the baby, but it was damned close.

"Goddamn it, what now?" Luke asked. "I was only joking about the Drakh attack, I swear it!"

Max Eilerson

Alwyn's body seized, while Galen calmly put enough electricity into his body to light up New Vegas. The older Mage's body arched, his face twisted in pain, and suddenly, he collapsed back onto the bed.

"Advise the bridge that there may be another power drain." Galen advised calmly. "In approximately thirty seconds."

The patient on the bed was still ashen, and Galen moved closer. The younger Mage whispered softly, "Damned fool. I told you going native would kill you."

Galen positioned his staff over Alwyn's body, and began gesturing again. No response from the still body. Shaking his head, Galen calmly announced, "Advise them in ten seconds... FIVE... FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE... CLEAR!"

Alwyn's body arched again, and then collapsed.

Silence. Galen gestured again, his face earnest and serious. No response.

Grabbing his staff, he swung it recklessly at Alwyn's chest, and there was a cracking sound when the staff hit the older Mage. Alwyn's body jerked from the blow, and his eyes opened. They were vacant and blank, lacking any spark of life. One of the doctors then tried to grab Galen, as the medical staff was a wee bit concerned about his unorthodox methods of treatment.

With an indifferent wave of his hand, Galen sent the medic flying across the room. There was a sickening crunch as one of basic laws of physics was revealed to be true. An object in motion will remain in motion, until acted upon by an outside force. In this case, the outside force was the immovable wall of the Medbay.

Suddenly, there was a gasping rattle as though Alwyn was trying to breath on his own, and Galen leaned over.

"Are... you... trying... to... kill... me?" The patient asked in a quiet voice. "You're ... not... getting... Ishtar... no... matter... what..."

Galen laughed, until he cried. The sight of Galen, always so damn infallible, arrogant and emotionless, actually crying, seemed to quiet everyone down, even Ilas. I was grateful for that, as I think she had broken three of my ribs, and for a moment, I thought I'd better ask for my own bed in Medbay.

"Too... damned... emotional..." Alwyn whispered. "Thought... the... Order... frowned... on... that..." Then the older Mage closed his eyes, and his familiar began nudging her head underneath his hand, as though trying to give the Mage strength.

I sat by the side of Dureena's bed looking down at our new daughter, held gently in my little thief's arms. I'll never say a word to Ilas but I think our daughter was even more beautiful than our son was when he was born. Probably due to the fact that she has none of my genes in her, but that doesn't make her any less mine. I *worked* for this child! Both at her conception and every day since, when I'd gritted my teeth at her mother's mood swings and tried not to notice the new holes in the walls where Dureena practiced her knife throwing on her really bad days. I'd quietly removed all the artwork into safekeeping, after she'd nearly taken off Van Gogh's other ear.

It was all worth it to see this beautiful scrap of life in her mother's arms. Ilas sat quietly on the other side of the bed and had the grace to look sheepish, whenever I moved too quickly and groaned from the pain in my cracked ribs.

The door opened quietly, and Luke Raven stuck his head in and smiled. "Feeling up to some visitors? I promise we'll be quiet and won't wake the baby."

Dureena dragged her eyes away from the little miracle she held so possessively, and the smile that appeared on her face nearly broke my heart. I'd thought that Ilas and I had made our little thief happy, but now I knew that her life had been incomplete.

"Yes, of course. I want to show off Ilori anyway. Isn't she the most beautiful baby ever?"

Luke smiled as he came into the room and peeked at our baby. "Well, I'm biased and I think that Faylinn and Naima were pretty cute, but yes, she's a beauty."

Demon, John and Lily followed Luke in and spread themselves around the room. Lily and Demon perched either side at the foot of the bed and John stood between them, smiling at us all. Demon leaned forward to look at her new niece and asked, "Ilori? That's pretty."

Dureena smiled and looked fondly at me. "Max suggested it. It means 'Special Treasure' in some Earth language he knows, and in Zanderi, it means 'Hard Work'. I have no idea why he thinks the second meaning is appropriate."

I grinned at Demon. "Sarah could tell you why, but she seems to be otherwise occupied. How is Alwyn, anyway?"

Luke grinned. "He's recovering nicely. Galen's approach to resuscitation may be a bit radical, but it certainly seems effective. Alwyn, Sarah and Ishtar are in a room across Medbay right now. I think Sarah has some special welcome back in mind, so I left them to it." He turned his smile to Dureena and

pulled out a flat package from under his long doctor's coat. "I have a gift for you and Ilori. Being out here in the middle of nowhere, I couldn't find any shops open, so I had to make do. I'm afraid the frame is from one of my medical diplomas, but you can replace it when you get somewhere civilized."

Luke handed over a picture. In the center was a holo-pic of Ilori, which must have been taken immediately after she'd been cleaned up. She was red, wrinkled and gorgeous. Under the picture were tiny hand and footprints. Luke pointed to them. "We took the originals for the birth records, but these are copies for you to keep."

I looked at Dureena, and she had tears in her eyes as she looked from the picture to her daughter and back again. OK, so I swallowed a lump the size of Phobos myself. I'm sentimental, sue me.

Demon gave Dureena a book. "I know she's a bit young yet, but she'll probably enjoy it when she's older." I laughed when I saw the title. 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves'.

Lily's gift was an embroidered cot cover. I have no idea how she'd done it so quickly, but the workmanship was exquisite. The main feature was a picture of a golden dragon with magenta eyes. Now who does that remind me of?

John looked distressed. "I didn't know what to get, and unlike Matthew, I didn't have a set of lock picks handy." He nodded at the case on the bed side table, left there by the Captain when he'd dropped by earlier. John had a point, how did Gideon just happen to have a set of those instruments to hand? I shook my head. It was pointless asking, as the Captain would lie through his teeth if it suited him.

John carried on, "So I got you this." He brought his gift out from behind his back.

We all stared at it for a moment, before Dureena said, "John? It's a bunny rabbit."

John looked a little ashamed. "You didn't give me a whole heck of a lot of time to shop for a gift, Dureena. One of the ensigns makes stuff like that, so it was either a fluffy bunny or a fluffy dragon. The dragons are going like hotcakes, since Ishtar streaked down the hallways. No one had seen her before that, except for us, so no dragons were available. A fluffy bunny, yes."

Ilas took the blue bunny from John's hand and looked at it carefully. She looked up and smiled. "Blue. I like blue. And I can do this." Before we knew it, there was a large blue bunny rabbit sitting by the side of the bed, holding a small blue bunny rabbit.

Demon looked at her sister, absolutely straight-faced, and said. "Ilas, I keep telling you. Harvey was *white*!"

When we'd all managed to stop laughing for long enough to catch our collective breath, Dureena looked around at all her friends, almost overwhelmed by their kindness. She whispered hoarsely, "Thank you," then gazed back down at our daughter again, an expression of tenderness and awe on our thief's face.

Demon cleared her throat quietly to attract our attention and looked uncharacteristically nervous. Normally, she gave the appearance of having no qualms about anything and her ice queen act could freeze a man's balls off at half a kilometer. It amazed me that Gideon of all people could melt that frost, and turn his wife into a warm, kind-hearted woman, but she still frightened the hell out of me!

"There's another gift for the baby. I'll go and get it if you're willing to accept it." Demon looked at Dureena hopefully and suddenly I knew who the gift was from. I looked around at my partner to see

how she was going to react to this approach. Now that she had Ilori in her arms, would she be able to forgive Angel at last?

Dureena frowned then looked up at Demon. "I'll only accept the gift if the giver brings it to me herself. I think it's past time that we let some old wounds heal, don't you?"

The smile that lit up Demon's face made me suddenly jealous of Gideon. If she smiled at him like that, no wonder he adored her, as he obviously did. The oldest of the sisters stood abruptly and almost ran from the room, dragging her younger sister back in with her only seconds later. Angel looked scared as she reluctantly entered, obviously unsure of the welcome she would receive.

Dureena looked at the nervous girl and smiled. "Sarah told me how you helped with the birth and said that if you hadn't arrived when you did, I might have lost Ilori." She gazed down adoringly at our daughter, still sleeping in her arms, before looking up at Angel again. Dureena put all her gratitude and forgiveness into her next words. "Thank you. Would you like to hold her?"

Angel looked completely stunned by Dureena's offer, but stepped forward and took Ilori gently into her arms, carefully pulling back the blanket the baby was wrapped in, to look at her face. "She's beautiful, Dureena. You and Max and Ilas must be very happy." The young witch's bright blue eyes were shiny with tears for a moment, then she smiled mischievously as she glanced sideways at Ilas, who had shifted back into her usual form. "Though I bet she'll be the only little girl in the galaxy who grows up worrying that her father is prettier than she is."

Angel handed Ilori back to her mother then reached into a pocket of the loose medical coat she wore over her red pants and top. "When Ilori is a little older, I'll teach her how to use this. If she follows her mother in her choice of profession, she might find it very useful." Balanced in the palm of Angel's hand was one of her balls of sight.

I'd only ever heard about them and never seen one in use, but I knew that the sphere Angel was now giving to our daughter was one of the rarest treasures in the galaxy. As far as anyone knew, those globes were only made by the Vorlons and the Technomages. No one else possessed one. I knew that the sisters had taken three from the castle on Eriadne, to give back to Angel when they found her. The rest had been carefully hidden in the depths of the castle. Ilas wouldn't even tell *me* where they'd put them!

I realized that I was damned close to salivating as I looked at that shiny ball resting in the palm of Angel's hand, and I became aware that Ilas was watching me closely. She turned to her sister and spoke. "I think I'd better take care of that, until Ilori is old enough to use it with discretion. It would be unfortunate if it were misused in the meantime, wouldn't it?" Ilas didn't look at me, but I knew where her comments were directed. Damn! With access to that ball I could... oh well.

Dureena held out her hand to Angel in silent thanks, and the two women smiled at each other. Angel said softly, "I hope that it will let Ilori see the way ahead more clearly than I ever did, and help prevent her from making the same foolish mistakes her aunt made." She then took a deep breath and went on. "If you're willing to forgive me, Dureena, then to be fair, there's someone else you should forgive. Do you think you might be able to do that?"

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

"She said what?" I looked at my wife in amazement, unable to believe what she was telling me. It had been enough of a shock when she'd recounted the reconciliation between Dureena and Angel. Worse was Deborah telling me that Angel had given the baby one of her balls of sight. The thought of Max Eilerson anywhere near one of those things made me shudder. But when she went on to tell me that Angel had asked Dureena to forgive Galen, I wondered for a moment if I'd slipped into a parallel universe where nothing made sense any more.

Yet there was my wife, sitting calmly, [she always sits calmly, I swear she'd look calm in the middle of a full scale battle, no matter how she was feeling inside,] telling me that the Technomage was visiting Dureena as we spoke. Remembering what Galen had said he'd brought the baby as a gift, I shot out of our quarters as if the poker game of the millennium were waiting for me in Medbay, and I already knew that my hand held four aces.

I arrived just in time to see Galen walking out of Dureena's room, his hood up, his staff grasped firmly in one hand. Well, he was walking, that was a good sign. I looked for puncture marks but couldn't see any. "Galen?" He didn't seem to have seen me as he started to walk past me.

The Technomage looked round in surprise. "Matthew? Sorry, I didn't see you there. Is there something you wanted?"

I shook myself. This parallel universe was getting spooky. "I *wanted* to see if you were still alive. I *wanted* to see how many holes Dureena had made in you with those throwing knives. I *wanted* to see if you needed Luke to sew them up."

Galen smiled condescendingly. One day I'm going to smear that smile... never mind. He spoke. "You really shouldn't worry so much, Matthew. You'll give yourself ulcers, you know. Dureena and I had a very civilized conversation. I apologized," Now the parallel universe was *really* beginning to scare me, "Dureena accepted my apology," [God, please let me go home, I promise to be good if you'll just let me go back to my own reality, OK?] "She also accepted my gift and we have parted friends."

This parallel universe was getting out of hand, so I clicked my ruby slippers three times and began to chant, "There's no place like Home. There's no place like Home. THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME!"

I opened my eyes, and realized that I was still in the parallel universe. Must be because I wasn't wearing my ruby slippers, as they didn't go with the uniform. I quickly looked around, for any place a man could be hiding behind a curtain. No curtains, either.

I shook my head. "That simple eh? For nearly three years, you two have barely spoken to each other and suddenly everything in the garden is rosy again? I don't believe in miracles, Galen. It can't have been that easy."

Galen looked at me sorrowfully. "That's very sad, Matthew. Miracles happen every day, you should believe in them. Two of them happened on this very ship earlier today. One of them is in there," he pointed to Dureena's room, "sleeping in her mother's arms. The other is over there." He used his staff to point at Alwyn's room.

"Alwyn nearly died today, so that a child could be born. You helped save his life, Matthew. Do try to believe in miracles." The Technomage started to walk away from me then turned in the doorway. "Oh,

and you could start believing in ghosts, too. They appear nearly as often as miracles."

The bastard walked out, leaving me speechless in the middle of Medbay. I hate it when he does that.

Epilogue

The Technomage lay in bed, recovering from his near death experience. It was amazing, he thought, that suddenly he had become so much more popular after he nearly died. People and fate are fickle things, he thought dryly, and his familiar warbled a soft agreement. Ishtar began butting his hand with her head, and sent thoughts of how she needed to be scratched on that spot right behind her crest.

Alwyn decided that he been very neglectful of his dragon lately, and started to scratch the spot aggressively. It had always tantalized and teased her over the centuries. She rewarded his strenuous exercise with a stern warning about not overdoing it, but since he was insisting, perhaps he could move his fingers a little over to the right.

"I can't believe they all came to see me," Alwyn remarked to his familiar, which earned him a chirp. "Oh, and you, they came to see you, too. I still can't believe you scratched Trace that badly. He might have been scarred if it hadn't been for Sarah."

Even Dureena had come to see him, carrying her baby in her arms, while Max and Ilas wheeled her in. She had lambasted him for his stupidity, so Alwyn had started commenting on pretty the new baby was, and wasn't she going to let him hold her? Or was Dureena the overly protective sort?

That had settled the new mother down quickly, and Alwyn had then carefully blessed the baby with a few Technomage sigils on her forehead. "May you be fleet of foot and nimble of fingers."

That having exhausted him, the Mage had asked them to leave, as he wanted to rest. They had barely left when Demon had shown up, and scolded him. She had gotten into a frightful tirade about his recklessness, so the Mage had fallen asleep in self-defense. Ishtar had crawled out from where she had been hiding and chirruped a challenge at Demon.

"OK, I'm going, but we'll continue this argument later."

Alwyn was still sleeping, his dragon familiar warm upon his chest when he suddenly noticed that someone new had arrived in the room. The smell of her fragrance and the dance of her atoms were quite familiar to him, and Alwyn woke up.

"Sarah, so you came to see me." His voice was delighted.

"WIZARD," Sarah growled, which hurt Alwyn's feelings. A wizard was a trickster, using sleight of hand to perform their tricks, and they were charlatans too! "You can cut the act."

"What act?"

"The collapsing in the middle of the birth act, requiring the pariahs and assorted outcasts to come

running to the rescue and save the day. Dear God, everyone's having a group hug session outside your room right now. One of them is even sobbing right now."

"Dureena's a little emotional, she just had a baby you know."

"Not Dureena. MAX! Though it might be because someone accidentally cracked three of his ribs." She leaned over the Mage. "You made the entire thing up, oh benevolent, generous, charitable and compassionate St. Alwyn of the Black Robes. You played your little Wizardly game, set up all the little dominoes in their places, and then, in the most dramatic way possible, you decide to collapse, causing all those little dominoes to fall over just the way you wanted them to. You lied to me. You lied to ISHTARI!"

Ishtar suddenly hissed in anger, and Alwyn was upset when he realized that she was on Sarah's shoulder, giving him the Evil Eye.

"Why?" Sarah asked.

"They needed a little help, as a few of them were being rather... difficult. There's a war to be fought still, Sarah, and we can't do it if there are cracks and chips in the wall. One weak spot targeted, and then the entire thing will be lost."

Sarah still wasn't happy. "So you set this entire thing up like a play. Do you like the result?"

"I think I could have improved the dialogue a bit. Our friends are a little--well, sappy and maudlin sometimes, I noticed. Not enough witty repartee."

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K

{[Part 1: The Mage, the Thief, the Linguist and Their Lover](#)} {[Part 2: Shadows of the Past](#)}