

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four L - Part 2: Bearing Arms

by The Space Witches



Meet Marcus' favorite toy - Half-Ted.

Chapter 1

April 2272

Gideon

It was the day after my son's 3rd birthday, and I'd returned to duty exhausted by the celebrations. The problem was that it hadn't been just his birthday, but also that of his twin cousins. All three children had been born on the same day three years before, which was less of a coincidence than you might think, as all three children had almost certainly been conceived within hours of each other, too. That first visit to Eriadne had been a little hectic, and the consequences were still with us all, in the shape of three equally noisy, if very different toddlers.

Of the three children, there's no doubt that my son, Marcus, is generally the troublemaker and ringleader. His mother insists that he's just like me, which is nonsense, of course. You just have to take one look at the kid to know who he *really* takes after. All those blond curls and big, golden brown eyes make him look as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, just like his mother. Ha! We know better.

Marcus has a sometimes unwilling follower in his cousin Dasha, son of my first officer, John Matheson, and his partner Lilith Morgaine. Dasha is a bright, gentle child, eager to please, with a cheerful disposition. He is utterly loyal to his friends, just like his father. When Marcus is doing something he shouldn't, you can usually find Dasha somewhere nearby, shaking his head in despair. You just know that Dasha tried to stop Marcus, but as usual, my reckless son wouldn't listen. I don't want to hear any comments about who that reminds you of, either.

Never far away from this odd couple is Dasha's twin sister, Faylinn. A pretty little girl, with golden red hair, her looks belie her determination not to be left out of anything the two boys get into. She has all her mother's fire and passion, and she generally has those attributes trained on my son, who does his best to take Dasha away from her, and to exclude little Faylinn from their games. I keep trying to tell Marcus that girls are fun, but he seems a little slow to learn. Oh well, I was fairly late in appreciating the attractions of the female sex myself, even with my rogue of a father introducing me to the pleasures of dancing girls at an earlier age than most.

In the meantime, my son's determination to have exclusive access to Dasha's time and attention leads to friction between him and Faylinn. She may be Lily's daughter by our ship's doctor, Luke Raven, but unlike her father, the little girl is less interested in healing wounds than in inflicting them. Preferably on Marcus. I can't say I blame her, to be honest. My son can be a little snot. I told you he doesn't take after me.

With this background, I'm sure you can imagine what a great time was had by all at the joint birthday party we held for the kids on the Excalibur. They'd all been spoiled rotten with gifts from their families and the crew, and they'd eaten much more cake and ice cream than was good for them. They'd got over-excited, over-tired and the subsequent tantrums were inevitable.

The day had ended perfectly with Marcus being sick over my shoulder, as I'd carried him back screaming to our quarters. He should have been sick over Deborah, but I'd taken him away from her when I'd seen that gleam in her eye that means my son may not survive another confrontation with his mother. If she'd carried him, she might just have 'accidentally' dropped him out of an airlock on the way back to our rooms. My wife loves our son dearly, but sometimes her maternal instincts desert her, and I can see her hands twitching with her desire to strangle Marcus. I have to admit that she usually has good reason. As I said, our son can be an obnoxious little snot when he chooses.

Once we'd finally got Marcus off to sleep, I'd gone to clean myself up while Deborah had made us supper, then we'd collapsed on the sofa and watched TV. There hadn't been much on, so we'd gone to bed early, and what we did after that is none of your business. I'll just leave it that maybe one day we'll want a little brother or sister for Marcus, and we want to make sure he or she is perfect. That takes a lot of practice. We like practicing.

I came on duty early next day to clear the backlog of paperwork associated with our current mission. We were deep in hyperspace, on our way to a Vree colony, right on the outer edge of charted space. The planet had been irradiated a few months before, when an unexpected solar flare had swept through the system, sterilizing every life-form above plant level on the planet. Everyone had expected the Vree to abandon their colony, but the small gray beings can be stubborn little bastards, and they'd called on the services of the ISA to help them keep the colony going. The Excalibur had been drafted to act as surrogate mother to a few million

embryos, all of which were currently stored in test tubes in our hold. Since her run in with the Fen, I can hardly maintain that my ship is a virgin, but I never expected her to become a mother at such a tender age, and certainly not to millions of children!

We had embryos of every animal species farmed by the Vree, as well as a few thousand of the Vree themselves, all kept in stasis, ready for implanting into the waiting mothers when the time was right. We carried the future of the colony in our hold.

You would not believe how much paperwork all those embryonic babies could create.

The sound of my commlink came as a welcome reprieve, after hours of peering at requisitions, progress reports, updates and bulletins on the health of the proto-babies in the hold. I'm sure my relief came across loud and clear in my voice as I breathed, "Gideon. Go," into my wristband.

Deborah's voice was subdued. "Matthew, are you busy?"

I sat up straight in my chair. In the two and a half years my wife had lived on the Excalibur with me, she had *never* called me directly while I was on duty. Deborah had a very strict idea of the lines of command on board a star-ship, and she'd never before breached ship's protocol. On the few occasions when she'd needed to contact me, she'd always gone through the Comm Officer on duty. If Deborah was calling me direct, there had to be some kind of emergency.

"What is it? Where are you?" I waited for her answer with my breath held.

There was a short pause, during which I could hear a child crying. Then Deborah's voice came on line again, soft and low. "We're in Medbay. No one is hurt, but we have a bit of a crisis on our hands. It would help if you could come down. And if you could bring John with you, that would be even better." The line went dead and I leaped out of my seat. I ran to the bridge, where I collected my First Officer and went hell for leather toward Medbay.

The first thing I saw as I hurtled through the doors of Medbay, with John Matheson hard on my heels, was Deborah. She was standing in the middle of the room with our son held tightly in her arms. Marcus' head was buried in her neck and he was sobbing hysterically. Deborah was trying to soothe him, and the waves of calm and love she was sending were discernible throughout Medbay, but they seemed to be having little effect on our son. I could feel his projections of grief from where I stood.

My wife turned as I entered, and her relief was evident as soon as she saw me. Her smile of gratitude sent my heart tumbling within my chest, as her smile always does. She gently kissed Marcus' head and whispered softly, "Look, Marcus. Here's Daddy. Everything will be all right now." My wife and son's faith in my ability to fix every problem usually makes me feel about ten meters tall, but I prefer to know what problem I'm expected to fix. Miracles I can do on the spot. The impossible sometimes takes a little longer.

Marcus lifted his head, and turned his tear stained face toward me. His eyes were red and swollen from crying, and his little face crumpled as he wailed, "Daddy!" He released his mother's

neck, and held his arms out toward me, struggling free from his mother's grasp. I caught Marcus just as he was about to fall, then held him tightly against my chest as he sobbed incoherently into my neck, still sending waves of stricken misery.

"What's going on? What happened here?" I had to raise my voice to be heard over the sound of screaming children. I watched as Deborah went to help Lily, who had been sitting on the floor trying to calm all three of her offspring. John had already relieved Lily of Dasha, and Deborah now picked up little Naima, only fifteen months old, but the loudest screamer on the Excalibur. My Narn Marines were known to duck and run for cover when Naima opened her mouth wide and roared.

Deborah didn't answer at once, concentrating on quieting Naima with more waves of calm and happiness. I rocked Marcus while I waited, stroking his hair and kissing his head, trying to project reassurance and safety to my distraught son. After a while it seemed to work, as his projections of pain gradually diminished.

Now there were four adults helping calm the children, we soon got their sobbing down to a level that made conversation possible. Deborah quietly explained what had happened, while she rocked little Naima gently in her arms. The little girl's thumb crept into her mouth and she was soon dozing under the effects of my wife's empathic sendings.

"I brought Marcus to the crèche after breakfast as usual. Dasha, Faylinn and Naima were already here, so I left the four of them playing, and came out to chat with Lily and Angel. Then we heard a scream. We ran into the crèche and found Marcus in hysterics. Dasha was crying because he thought it was somehow his fault. Faylinn was crying because she *knew* it was her fault, and she knew she shouldn't have done it. This little one," Deborah paused to kiss Naima's bright red hair gently before continuing, "was crying because everyone else was crying and it seemed like a good idea."

Deborah gave me a sad, brave smile. My heart lurched again and I smiled back, asking, "So what did Faylinn do to make Marcus so upset?"

Before Deborah could reply, my son raised his head and sobbed, "She sass...snass...DEADED Half-Ted!"

The story was a little more complicated than Marcus made out. It appeared that my son had taken his beloved Half-Ted with him to the crèche, as usual. The teddy bear had hardly left Marcus' side since the day he was born. It only had one ear, since Marcus had sucked and chewed the other ear into shreds while teething, but no matter how many new bears we bought him, none could replace the treasured original. I have to admit, I got quite a kick out of that. I'd gone to enormous trouble to get that teddy bear when Earth was still under quarantine due to the Drakh plague. Somehow, my son's devotion to the toy made all that trouble worthwhile.

On arrival at the crèche, Marcus had placed Half-Ted to one side while he played with Dasha. As far as I could make out, Marcus had been particularly nasty about excluding Faylinn from their game. Dasha had tried to persuade him to let her join in, but my son had got stubborn--i have no idea where he gets that from. Must be his mother--and pushed Faylinn away.

The little girl had pouted for a while, then she'd gone off with her baby sister, announcing that

she was going to play doctors. This may have seemed like a tribute to her father's profession, but Faylinn's idea of medicine was a little drastic. It consisted of radical surgery on a certain defenseless bear. When Marcus next looked up, poor Half-Ted had been torn limb from limb.

Apparently, Faylinn had shrieked with glee as she'd hurled the bear's arms and legs to the four corners of the crèche and then presented Marcus with the limbless torso. Not surprisingly, my son had been a little upset.

As the story emerged, Faylinn defended herself as best she could. "It's his fault! He was mean to me!"

She had a point, but that hardly excused her reaction. I might have forgiven her for tearing Marcus apart, but the bear had never hurt her, why should he suffer? I sent a silent prayer to the indifferent gods that Faylinn never decided to become a doctor. Anyone unfortunate enough to encounter a scalpel in her hands had better hope she was in a good mood. I pitied the man who came across her in later life when she had a bad case of PMS.

Lily quietly admonished her daughter, making it quite clear that her behavior, no matter how much she had been provoked, was unacceptable, and that dire punishment awaited her. What that was to be remained unspecified, but the look in Faylinn's eyes made it clear that she took the promise seriously. The usually ebullient little girl went very quiet.

Dasha was still sniffing softly in his father's arms, and I could hear him whispering, "I tried to stop them, Aboji. I knew Faylinn would do something bad, but Marcus wouldn't listen, and then I forgot and..." The little boy started to cry again, as John tried to soothe him, telling him that it wasn't his fault.

I walked over to where John and Dasha stood, and reached around Marcus to pat Dasha's head, reassuring him that he hadn't been to blame. I knew exactly who'd been at the root of the trouble. He was clinging to my neck, sniffing loudly.

Looking back over at Deborah, I frowned and asked, "Where are Luke and Angel? This is their territory, isn't it? Did they run out of Medbay screaming when the trouble started?" I wouldn't have blamed them. I was tempted to do the same.

Deborah smiled again, this time a happier smile. "They're in there." She lifted her chin toward the surgical suite, having both hands full of Naima at the time. "Luke thinks he might be able to save Half-Ted, and at Marcus' insistence, Angel went in with him, to assist. The best medical team on the ship is now devoted to reassembling a one eared teddy bear."

She does it on purpose, you know. Deborah always tries to crack me up at the most inappropriate moment. A mournful little face looked up at me, eyes red from weeping, and Marcus' tiny voice gulped out, "Why do you want to laugh, Daddy? Half-Ted's hurt. He needs resus...resus...making better. Do you think Uncle Luke and Auntie Angel know how to make him better? Have they helped teddy bears before?"

Having an empath for a son can be damned inconvenient at times.

Angel

"I thought *you* could sew!" My voice had an edge of hysteria to it, which I hurriedly swallowed as Luke Raven stared at me across the operating table.

"Me? Whatever gave you that idea?! I thought that was why you agreed to assist. I thought you knew I couldn't sew and were coming in here to help!" Luke's usually deep voice had risen to a squeak of panic by the end of the sentence.

We both looked down at the operating table in despair. The dismembered corpse of Half-Ted looked up at us accusingly. Luke had carefully positioned the arms and legs ready for reattachment, before telling me to proceed. That was when we discovered that neither of us could sew.

I took a deep breath and told myself not to panic. It wasn't that bad, really. My nephew was only waiting outside for us to save the most important thing in his life, after his family. On the other hand, it was quite possible that Marcus put Half-Ted before his family in importance.

Oh shit. We were in trouble.

I glared up at Luke again, saying, "I thought all doctors could sew! You do sutures, don't you? What's the difference if it's a person or a bear. A suture's a suture, isn't it?"

Luke took a deep breath and spoke slowly, through teeth that were so firmly gritted he risked cracking the enamel. He quietly explained that doctors had given up suturing their patients decades before. These days they used a biological glue to stick wounds together. You may wonder how I'd worked in Medbay for two and a half years without learning that little fact. I'll just say that when people start bleeding I take myself elsewhere. Fast!

I do the herbal stuff, and some research. I'm a whiz with a microscope, but don't expect me to stick a Band-aid on your bloody finger. I'd probably faint. The time I'd assisted at Dureena's delivery was an aberration. The only reason I hadn't thrown up on the spot was my vomiting would have turned a really ugly situation even worse. One very bloody c-section, one screaming, flaming dragon, and one very dead Technomage was bad enough. A vomiting doctor's assistant would have been the last straw. I got out of there as soon as I could, and threw up for hours afterwards.

So here we were with one disassembled teddy bear and a doctor who couldn't sew. Why do I always end up in these situations? Why couldn't I be outside with four screaming kids? On second thoughts, I decided the peace and quiet of the surgical suite was preferable, although the reek of panic was getting a bit strong in there.

I was almost hoping that a damn Technomage would show up. Well, Alwyn at least. While I'm sure that either Galen or Alwyn would be able to fix the bear, Alwyn had a son, so he'd be more sympathetic. Having said that, do Technomages have teddy bears? Or do they just have real live bears to play with?

Taking another deep breath, I pushed all distractions aside and asked, "Is there anything we could sew with in here? Or could we glue Half-Ted back together?"

Luke shook his head. "The glue won't work. It only adheres to living tissue; it won't work on fur! And there isn't a needle or thread anywhere in Medbay, to the best of my knowledge." Now

it was my turn to do some teeth gritting. Why hadn't he told me that before he rushed us both in here? There was no way out of this room except past a little boy who wanted his bear back. Intact.

When in trouble, when in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout. I was about to start running around in circles, screaming, when I caught sight of the commlink on Luke's wrist. Maybe there was a way out of this after all.

Gideon

When the doors swished open behind us, I turned to see my Marine Sergeant enter, his face a picture of concern. G'Tan's appearance was enough to distract Marcus from his question, and he turned in my arms to look up at one of his favorite uncles. My son's face was mournful as he whimpered softly, "Half-Ted is dead, Uncle G'Tan."

G'Tan smiled gently down at my son, and lifted his spotted hand to pat the tangle of blond curls on Marcus' head, saying, "There's still hope, little one. Dr. Raven and your Aunt Angel have asked me to join them. They think I can help." Before I could ask him what help he was going to deliver, the large Narn shot through the doors into the surgical suite. They closed behind him with a gentle thud.

I turned to look at my wife and First Officer. I didn't need to ask the question. They both just shrugged, obviously as puzzled as I was by G'Tan's disappearing into surgery. What help could a Marine Sergeant possibly deliver to a doctor and a witch?

Angel

"Did you bring it?" G'Tan nodded seriously and I heaved a sigh of relief. All was not lost.

Luke looked annoyed as he asked, "Will one of you explain what's going on? How can G'Tan help us?"

I hadn't let Luke hear my conversation with G'Tan. I'd taken his commlink to the far end of the suite and spoken softly, to avoid the good doctor eavesdropping while I made arrangements. Truth be told, I was worried I'd remembered wrong, and I didn't want Luke to think I was an idiot until I was sure.

Now our salvation stood in front of us, two meters tall, nearly as broad, and very spotty. If I could have reached around G'Tan, I would have hugged him.

I turned and smiled at Luke, saying, "May I introduce you to Marine Sergeant G'Tan? You may not know that the Sergeant's favorite hobby is sewing. He makes many of the pouchlings' clothes in his spare time, and I've heard him discussing patterns with Lily."

It was the recollection of that incongruous conversation that had led me to remember G'Tan's skills. While we could have asked Lily to join us, as she was an expert with a needle, my mental link with my sisters made me all too aware that they had their hands full with the children.

Lily didn't have time for needlework right then. Fortunately, our Marine Sergeant did.

Pulling a sewing kit from his pocket, G'Tan then balanced a pair of half-rim spectacles on the end of his nose as he bent over to inspect the remains. After a couple of moments' tense study, he looked up and smiled. "No problem at all. We'll soon have this bear back in one piece."

Gideon

The wait seemed eternal, only interrupted by the occasional snuffle from my son. I'd taken the opportunity provided by the delay to move quietly into a side room. I'd sat Marcus on my knee, and we'd had a man to man discussion about the dangers of pushing people too far, and how it sometimes made good people do bad things. After more tears and distress, he'd finally accepted that his own unkindness to Faylinn had triggered the disaster, and he even admitted that he'd sensed Faylinn's anger and disappointment at being excluded, but he'd ignored it because she was 'only a girl'. God help my son if he didn't grow out of *that* misapprehension sometime soon, because one day some pissed off female might amputate something a little nearer and dearer to his heart. Or his groin.

Marcus had eventually promised to be nicer to his female cousins in future, and while I didn't hold out a lot of hope for a total change in his character, I knew he would try.

When he remembered.

My son was still feeling very sorry for himself when I'd carried him back into the main room of Medbay, and passed him back to his mother. Marcus snuffled into Deborah's neck as she spoke softly to him, and I knew she was reinforcing my message. Their distraction gave me an opportunity to snuggle Naima, who Deborah had passed to me when she'd taken Marcus back.

The little redhead lay fast asleep in my arms, her long, dark lashes resting on her flushed cheeks, her sparkling emerald green eyes hidden by pale eyelids that flickered as she dreamed. I brushed a soft strand of fiery red hair from her face and wondered again, as I had done so many times since she was born, if this little beauty was my daughter.

The doors opening disturbed my ponderings, and I looked up to see Luke and Angel standing in the doorway to the surgical suite. Both were in full surgical gear, and I again had to suppress a smile as I saw how serious they both looked.

Marcus struggled out of his mother's arms and ran to Angel, tugging at the hem of her smock and looking up hopefully. "Did you save him, Auntie Angel? He's not dead any more, is he?"

Angel stooped and lifted Marcus into her arms, then pulled the surgical cap from her head, allowing her raven hair to fall free. She smiled at my son, saying, "He never was dead, Marcus. He was just a little..." Angel paused, searching for the right word. "Disjointed. He's fine again now."

Luke Raven pulled his hand from behind his back and there was Half-Ted, back in one piece. I had to suppress another smile when I saw that bandages had been carefully wrapped around his shoulders and hips, probably hiding the joins. As Marcus let out a shriek of delight and

reached for the bear, Luke pulled it back a little, out of my son's reach.

"Careful, Marcus. Half-Ted's a little delicate right now. You need to be very gentle with him for a bit, while he recovers from his surgery. Angel, G'Tan and I have done our best, but he'll need to see a specialist before he's properly better. Be kind, now."

Marcus reached out and carefully took his bear back, hugging him gently as he looked up at us all, his eyes glowing with happiness.

"Half-Ted's been very sick, but he's getting better now, and we all have to be very kind to him. Mummy, I think Half-Ted needs some ice cream after he's been so sick, don't you? Please?"

The manipulative little bastard put on his most pathetic smile, the one he knew melted every adult's heart, as he looked up at us all hopefully. I made an executive decision. "I think we all deserve ice cream. G'Tan, will you join us?" I led my family to the nearest mess hall, ready to celebrate the resurrection of Half-Ted, who once again bore his arms proudly.

I found out later that G'Tan had done all the real work on Half-Ted, but he hadn't had the right thread with him. He'd used the strongest thread he'd had available, but he'd still been concerned that rough handling could make the bear limbless again. Hence the bandages and the warning. The next time we stopped at B5, we smuggled Half-Ted out of Marcus' bed in the dead of night, and got him professionally reassembled. Marcus never knew he'd been gone.

As Deborah and I stood over our sleeping child, his most treasured possession tucked back under his arm, I kissed my wife lightly and whispered, "Do you think we could risk having another one, some day?"

Deborah leaned into my embrace and kissed me back, then whispered against my lips. "Some day. Let's go practice some more."

As I said, we like practicing.

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four L

{[Part 1: Bravery](#)} {[Part 1A: Me, Myself and Bo](#)} {[Part 2: Bearing Arms](#)}