

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B - Part 3: A Winter's Tale

by *The Space Witches*



Oscar

Chapter 1

8th December 2288

Matthew Gideon

Having kissed my wife goodbye as she departed into the cold, dark night I closed the front door after one last longing, lingering look at her butt and turned to the dog, saying, "Looks like it's just you and me tonight, buddy. What shall we do? Get some strippers in and play poker? Or maybe a quiet night with feet up on the sofa, a book and a big glass of a twenty year old malt whisky?"

Oscar—my dog, if you hadn't guessed, although strictly speaking he's my son's dog—tilted his head to one side and looked up at me quizzically. He was used to me spouting nonsense at him and paid me very little attention. No comments about how much he has in common with the rest of the universe, please.

"OK, a quiet night in it is, but I should warn you that there's no sofa, book or whisky in your immediate future. It's just the rug in front of the fire for you."

Oscar didn't seem concerned about the lack of entertainment, and he was soon curled up on the rug, fast asleep, while I stretched out on the sofa, music playing quietly in the background, data pad in one hand and a glass of fine old Scotch in the other.

Bliss.

Especially on a cold, dark night in the depths of the Minbari winter. We'd had snow earlier and I'd seen Deborah off into the darkness with the stars sparkling in a black sky above and white snow

below glittering with frost. I'd been somewhat selfishly glad that it was her going out, not me.

Now don't get me wrong. Spending quiet evenings at home with my wife is always my preference. Having her warm body curled up against me on the sofa is at all times better than stretching out alone. But on the rare occasions when she is out for the evening, I have to admit that I enjoy my own company.

On this evening, Deborah had gone down to the Rangers' Refectory to spend some time with the new intake of trainees. She does this at least once with every new class, getting a feel for how they're settling in, who's doing well, who's getting homesick and who's out of their depth. Having an empath for a wife makes my job as Entil'Zha of the Anla'Shok much easier. She can tell me which trainee Rangers need extra support and which ones are thriving. And she can do that job more effectively if the Boss isn't around to intimidate everyone. Hence why I get left behind at home.

I was particularly looking forward to this quiet night in, as work had been hectic over the previous couple of months. We'd discovered a black market weapons smuggling ring with links to some very high places within the ISA as well as the Raiders, and we'd been putting plans in place to round up all the smugglers and their co-conspirators. Everything was nearly ready to go and once the round-up started, I knew I'd be working every waking hour for a while.

So just for one night, I had every intention of kicking back with a book, a drink, a warm fire, and only my dog—excuse me, Marcus' dog—for company.

You know what's going to happen next, don't you? The universe always has plans for Matthew Gideon. He never gets to just kick back and relax. Something always happens.

On this occasion, the something was a ring on the doorbell.

I frowned as I placed my datapad and glass on a side table. I wasn't expecting company and it was rare for anyone to just drop in on the Entil'Zha's residence. Most people living in or visiting the Ranger compound were—not surprisingly—Rangers, and they tended to check that a visit would be welcome before turning up on my doorstep unannounced.

My devoted guard dog did his duty by opening one eye, watching me drag myself off the sofa and then going back to sleep. If it were an assassin at the door waiting to take out the leader of the Rangers, Oscar wasn't going to be much help. In fact, I'd probably have to rescue him. Then again, I doubted that an assassin would be polite enough to ring the doorbell. But I did a quick detour via my office and pulled a charged PPG from my desk, just in case.

Grandpa Gideon always taught me that paranoia could be a good thing if they really were out to get you.

Holding the PPG behind my back, I checked the screen by the side of the front door. The outside camera showed me a clear view of the visitor's face and I couldn't help but smile. An unexpected visit from an old friend is always welcome.

But I kept the PPG behind my back as I opened the door.

It never hurts to be cautious. Or paranoid if you prefer.

"Joanna! What the hell are you doing on Minbar? Why didn't you call ahead?"

Joanna Karavitis was an old friend, who I'd first met when we were Earthforce cadets together. After graduating from Officer Training School, I'd gone on to serve on the Hunter as an Ensign, but Joanna had decided to go the Medical School instead, training as a doctor. As a result, neither of us had been caught up in the Battle of the Line, as my ship had been guarding Mars when the Minbari jumped straight past us, and Jo had been learning her new profession back on Earth.

My old friend took a step forward and smiled. "I wasn't really expecting to be here just now. It was all a bit sudden. I hope it's not inconvenient?"

Jo's voice had lowered a little over the years—the result of too many late nights playing poker in smoke filled rooms and too much whisky—but she'd retained her good looks and petite figure, now clad in what looked like a ship's flight suit. A blue one piece with an open neck and lots of pockets in case you were wondering. It was a little strange that she wasn't wearing a coat. The temperature outside was well below freezing but she showed no sign of feeling the cold.

Looking at my old friend I could see that her hair was no longer the vibrant red it had been when we were cadets together, nor even the softer auburn streaked with silver she'd had when I'd last seen her nearly ten years before. Now her hair was completely silver. I could hardly comment as my own hair was heading in that direction. Well, that's only to be expected when you hit your seventh decade as both Jo and I had a number of years before.

I grinned and waved her in—not with the hand holding the PPG—and said, "It's always good to see you, Jo. Come on in."

As she stepped across the threshold with a blast of cold air, Oscar came out of the living room to investigate my caller. He may be a lousy guard dog, but he's inquisitive. Usually about the contents of any visitor's pockets, just in case they're concealing something edible.

Much to my surprise, as I closed the door behind my guest, Oscar stopped dead in the hallway, his hackles rising, and he started to bark. Joanna froze in place and I apologized. "I'm sorry, Jo. He's not usually like this. I don't know what's gotten into him."

I surreptitiously slipped the PPG into my pocket—with the safety on; I value the parts of my anatomy close to my pocket and my wife values them even more—then ushered Oscar into the kitchen. His reaction disturbed me. Was there something about my old friend that he was picking up on? A guard dog he's not, but I trusted his instincts. Something wasn't quite right.

Once Oscar was safely shut away—I didn't want him getting hurt if things should get nasty—I turned back to Joanna where she stood in the hallway and smiled. "Come on in, make yourself comfortable. Can I get you a drink?"

I waved Jo into the living room, making sure I kept my eyes on her at all times. My old friend walked ahead of me and sat on the sofa I indicated, smiling as she said, "That would be great, thanks Matt. Got any decent Scotch you can spare? It's been a while since I've been anywhere I could pick up anything good."

I lifted the bottle I'd been sampling earlier and showed her the label. "Will this do?"

Joanna let out a low whistle as she saw the make and year, as she should. It had taken a lot of negotiating and more credits than I cared to think about to get a crate of that stuff to Minbar. My alternate self from another universe—it's complicated—was still going on about how difficult it had been to arrange the shipment. It almost made me regret asking him to get it for me. Almost.

And the Entil'Zha's residence was the only place on the planet where alcohol was on offer, as the Minbari react badly to the stuff. And I do mean badly. As in violent, homicidal rages.

I poured a generous measure and handed it over, then retreated to the other sofa, where my own glass awaited me on the side table. I sat carefully, making sure the PPG in my pocket was well concealed. I didn't want Joanna to see it, and neither did I want her to think any suspicious bulge in that area meant I was even more pleased to see her than I was. Although there had been plenty of occasions in the past when Joanna and I had been extremely pleased to see each other. Lots of each other. As in seeing each other without any clothes to spoil the view.

I told you she was an old friend. A friend with benefits in the old days. Some very nice benefits indeed.

Jo raised her glass in a toast. "To old friends, and new lives."

An interesting toast, but one I was happy to reciprocate. After we'd both drunk, I asked, "So what have you been doing for the last...what is it? Nearly ten years? I haven't seen you since early '79 when we bumped into each other on Mars."

I'd been on a mission for President Sheridan at the time. He and Delenn had just escaped from Centauri Prime, rescuing their son, David, and bringing him home. David was now one of my best Rangers and my son's idol and mentor. Back in '79 I'd bumped into Joanna in a bar in Mars Dome One, where she'd been waiting for a transport to take her to her next assignment, an Explorer class ship out on the Rim, exploring (duh!) new sections of space and building new jumpgates.

Jo took a sip of her Scotch, closed her eyes and sighed in appreciation. "This is good stuff, Matt. I don't think I want to know how you got hold of it. You always did have a way of getting what you wanted." She grinned widely and winked. "I remember at the Academy, you had most of the women, and a fair few men, lining up to get a sample of what you were offering."

I tried to look innocent and failed miserably. "They took advantage of me. I was a young, naïve cadet who knew no better."

That caused my old friend to laugh out loud. "You're talking to the wrong person, Matt. I took too many rides on that monster you keep in your pants to believe you were ever naïve. And those magic fingers of yours were also in demand, as I recall."

This time I tried to look modest, and failed at that, too. "I just wanted to get along with my fellow cadets, and if that's what they wanted, who was I to deny them?"

Jo chuckled and asked, "Did you ever spend a single night alone in your bed, Matt? I sometimes wondered where you found the energy to attend classes."



I sighed and said, "We were a lot younger in those days, Jo, with a lot more stamina. I couldn't keep up that pace these days."

Joanna tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes. "I somehow doubt that, Matt. If the woman whose picture you showed me on Mars is still in your life, I doubt if all you do in bed these days is sleep. Is she still around?"

I couldn't help but grin as I said, "Very much so. She's out this evening, but Deborah and I are still very happily married. We celebrated our nineteenth wedding anniversary a couple of months back and hope to celebrate many more to come."

Jo raised her glass again and said, "I wish you well, Matt. I never thought you'd settle down to marriage and parenthood, but it suits you. You look content. Although, why the hell wouldn't you be happy?" She waved her glass in a gesture at the room and building we were sitting in. "You get to be boss of the Rangers and live in the lap of luxury. Nice work if you can get it."

The glass was nearly empty so I stood and grasped the bottle, leaning across the coffee table to give her a refill. There had been an element of what sounded almost like resentment in her words, and that wasn't like the Joanna I'd always known. She'd always been a generous soul who rejoiced in her friends' good fortune. Something was going on here; something more than just Oscar's odd dislike of my old friend, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"So what have you been up to while I've been getting this lucky? What happened after your tour out on the Rim? You were Chief Medical Officer on the De Soto if I recall correctly."

Joanna nodded. "It was a good tour, not too much action, just enough to keep us occupied but we didn't lose anybody on that trip. We were out for nearly five years and not a single fatality. That's a damn good record, Matt. Damn good."

I nodded my agreement. Given the nature of the work, casualty rates on Explorer ships could be high. I'd lost a few crew members during my time as Captain of an Explorer class ship and I can still list their names. Too many names. I never left anyone behind and never forgot those who lost their lives under my command. I had no doubt that the lack of fatalities during Jo's watch had been down to her skills as CMO and she must have had a good Captain, too. Better than me. I told her as much then waited for her to continue.

Jo leaned forwards, stretching her ship's suit across her breasts in a way that made me think of a number of occasions when I'd seen those breasts bouncing happily above me as she rode me hard. My old friend had always liked to be on top.

I moved my eyes up to meet hers and she grinned. She knew exactly where I'd been looking and what I'd been thinking. She raised her glass again and said, "Happy days, eh Matt? Happy days."

Of course, they hadn't all been happy as the Earth/Minbari War had been raging at the time, but we'd had some good times despite that. We'd fucked ourselves stupid every night because none of us had been sure whether we would survive to see the next day.

But I nodded my agreement with her toast, then asked, "So what did you do after the tour ended?"

Joanna gave me a happy smile. "Believe it or not, Matt, I got married."

That set me back in my seat. If Jo thought I'd been an unlikely candidate for wedded bliss, it was nothing compared to my astonishment at her news. I couldn't imagine my old friend settling down with one man—or one woman for that matter. Jo had always been inclusive in her tastes.

"Who's the lucky spouse?" I asked, careful not to make assumptions.

Jo settled herself back into the sofa. She turned her head slightly to gaze into the open fire before replying, "His name is Joe. Joe Purandare. He was an Engineer on the De Soto while I was serving there. We hooked up during the tour and decided to make it more permanent afterwards. He's just a couple of years younger than me, so we both took retirement when the tour ended. We wanted to stake out a homestead on one of the new Earth colonies, and set up shop there. I planned to hang out my shingle and tout for medical business, while Joe set up a repair shop, fixing anything that needed fixing in the colony. We even came up with a slogan. 'Come to JoJoe's. We fix people and stuff.' We used our savings to buy a small farm, knowing we had enough to live on from our Earthforce pensions if the farming and repair businesses didn't work out."

I tilted my head to one side and asked, "So did it work out?"

Jo turned her head back towards me and grinned, then replied, "In a way. We cleared the land, planted a crop and carried on with the rest of the business on the side. Joe was busy enough with his repair shop, but work was slow for me. Those colonists were hardy folk, and beyond patching up the odd cuts and bruises and splinting the occasional broken limb, there wasn't much to stretch my medical skills. But it was a nice little place, with kind, hard-working people and after six months I was ready to climb the walls with frustration and boredom."

I started to laugh as she went on to tell me stories about some of the colonists and their activities, conceding that it was hardly surprising she'd got bored. I remembered my own time after I retired from the Excalibur, when I'd almost destroyed my marriage with my behavior because I'd felt bored and useless. At least Joanna had had the farm and a medical practice to occupy her some of the time. She hadn't hit the bottle as I had during that low period of my life.

I took another sip of my Scotch and glanced briefly around the room, wondering at how much things had changed since then. A job working as a troubleshooter for John Sheridan had led to me being appointed as Ranger One and living in this house on Minbar. It was a nice house, and the room where I sat with my old friend was a nice room. Decorated in the pale shades favored by my wife, three very comfortable sofas were set perpendicular to each other around a large coffee table, with the fourth side of the square filled by the hearth and open fire. On cold winter nights the soft lighting and the blazing fire made for a comfortable and relaxing place to sit and listen to stories told by an old comrade.

I looked back across at Jo and asked, "So what did you do about it? I assume you did something, or you wouldn't be here now."

Joanna smiled again and took another sip from her glass. "We sold the farm and the crop, even made a good profit on it then used the credits to buy a small trading ship. We registered it on Mars and changed the name to 'JoJoe's Repair Ship and Surgery'. Then we went looking for business, rather than waiting for it to come to us."

Jo went on to tell me how she and her husband had worked their way around the smaller Earth colonies, trading goods when they could, offering their medical and repair services where they were needed. It sounded like a fun way to live, travelling and offering useful support to places not large enough to have their own doctors, hospitals or even decent engineering skills. The expertise that Joanna and her husband had been able to offer to those remote colonies had been welcomed and they'd become popular visitors, having the red carpet rolled out for them pretty much wherever they went.

I was surprised my doppelganger, Jack Gideon, had never come across them in his travels. I was sure he'd have mentioned it to me if he had. Joanna was a friend from before our lives had split apart. Look, I told you it was complicated.

Joanna sighed as she said, "Yes, it was a good life, but as they say, 'all good things must come to an end'. It just didn't end quite as we'd expected. We'd thought there might come a day when we got too old and decrepit to keep travelling and we'd eventually have to settle down, but that wasn't how it worked out."

My old friend looked sad and I poured her another small measure of Scotch, waiting for her to continue. After a few moments of silence, while she looked into the flames of the fire as if seeking an answer to a question I hadn't asked, she refocused her gaze on me and gave a sad smile.

"We were on a trip to a small mining colony in Sector 24. Since the Dilgar were wiped out the whole sector has been pretty much wide open and quite a few small Earth colonies have sprung up. This one was on a small moon circling a gas giant in the Aldhanab system. The moon was mostly made of metal, and the miners were selling the ore as fast as they could dig it out. They called the place Goldmine, which was misleading as it wasn't gold they were digging, but a range of other ores that are nearly as valuable. It was still a small independent operation, but the miners knew that soon enough one of the big corporations would move in on them, so they were working as hard as they could to get as much of their ore out before that happened. It was rough, heavy work, and those boys and girls liked to work hard and play hard. They'd been amongst our best customers on our previous runs, buying most of our cargoes, and having plenty of work for both me and Joe."

Jo took another sip of her drink and went on, "So before we set out we filled the ship with crates of cheap liquor, and I stocked my pharmacy with plenty of hangover cures, then we made our way to Aldhanab. We should have known something odd was going on as soon as we dropped through the jumpgate and saw the biggest mother of a comet crossing the system that either of us have ever had the misfortune to see."

I twitched at the mention of the comet. I'd had some weird experiences due to a comet a couple of months previously. My twitch got worse as Jo looked at me intently and continued, "Those Brakiri

have it right, Matt. Comets are just pure bad news."

Putting comets and Brakiri together in one sentence had the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. I completely agreed with my old friend. The two together made for some very peculiar events. I said nothing and waited for Jo to go on.

"Booji knows what had knocked it out of the Aldhanab Oort Cloud, but I think it must have been the comet's first visit to the inner system as it was outgassing a tail longer than anything I've ever seen before. It must have been twenty million clicks or more long. The damned thing was visible with the naked eye as soon as we dropped out of hyperspace.

"But we just thought it was a spectacular light show and made our way towards the mining colony, broadcasting on all channels to let them know we were on our way in. But the next weird thing was when we heard nothing back. Total silence on all communication channels. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. The colony had gone completely silent."

I was getting a really bad feeling about what Jo was telling me and started wracking my brains to remember if I had any Rangers in that part of space. Joanna took another sip of her drink and went on. "As we got closer to the colony, we started to pick up a very faint distress signal. But it wasn't coming from the colony."

Of course they did. The only way this story could get worse was for them to have come across a wrecked ship, so that was what had happened. As I listened to Jo describe how they found the ship, it felt as if the cold and dark from outside had penetrated the room. I shivered, then stood and moved to the fire, adding wood and staring into the sparks and flames as my old friend talked.

"It was badly holed, but we couldn't tell if there were survivors from our ship. So Joe and I suited up and went over. We didn't bother with the airlock; we just went straight in through a large hole in the side."

The image of jetting across space in a suit, then entering the wreck, made me shiver again. I've always hated EVAs since I'd been stranded in space when the Cerberus was destroyed. I poked at the fire, and added even more fuel, causing it to blaze up, in an attempt to banish the chill that had settled on me.

"Our scanners had shown the bridge still had atmosphere, so we made our way there and Joe set up a temporary air lock. We got in without losing the air inside. The bridge was littered with bodies. I checked them all for life signs but there was nothing alive in there. I'm still not sure what killed them all. Some had severe battle injuries, but not all. Those who were uninjured appeared to have been poisoned in some way. I didn't have time to make tests on the bodies and the atmosphere had checked out clean, but I was glad that neither of us had taken off our suits. There was nothing we could do for anyone there, so Joe deactivated the distress signal, and we started to make our way out."

Joanna took another slow sip of her drink, than continued, "We were nearly at the airlock when we heard a knocking sound. It came from a small room at the back of the bridge, some sort of ready room I guess. When we looked through the panel in the door, we both jumped a mile. There was a face looking back at us, and a hand knocking on the window."

I couldn't help myself interjecting, "What the hell, Jo? Is this some kind of ghost story? Are you trying to spook me?" I laughed shakily, telling myself that maybe Jo was making this all up and she was just trying to get a rise out of me.

My old friend smiled sadly and said, "Ghost story? In a way, I guess it is. But the Brakiri in the ready room was alive and knocking. Well, he was then anyway."

Jo went on to describe how she and her husband had moved the temporary airlock to the ready room, so they could get in without letting any of the bridge atmosphere penetrate. Just in case it was contaminated in a way they couldn't detect. The Brakiri inside told them he was a merchant and the ship had been on their way to Goldmine to trade for their ores. Like Jo and Joe, his ship hadn't received any answers to their hails, and then they'd been attacked.

"The Brakiri said he hadn't recognized their attackers, but assumed they were Raiders. Normally they would have been able to fight off ships like those attacking them, but these ships were using weapons far more powerful than anything they'd seen before. He said the only time he'd seen guns that powerful was when the First Ones fought in the Battle of Brakiri Space. When the Vorlons and the Shadows fought they used weapons similar to those used on the merchant ship. The Brakiri said he'd been on a ship in that battle and had watched the destruction the First Ones wrought. I was skeptical at first. I mean, that battle took place back in 2260, nearly thirty years ago. But looking at the Brakiri—he never told us his name—I realized that he was probably old enough to have been a young man in that conflict. So maybe he was telling the truth. And if he was it was very bad news."

Jo turned to stare at me and said, "You need to know this, Matt. There are Raiders out there with weapons that can match what the Shadows and Vorlons had. You need to find them and stop them."

I nodded. "I'm already on it, Jo. We're in the process of breaking up a ring of smugglers that's been looting Shadow tech. We'll get them and we'll stop them. I wish we'd been in time to save that Brakiri ship, but it will all be over soon, I promise you."

The relief on Jo's face was clear and she sat back in the sofa and sighed. I went on, "So did you manage to get the Brakiri out of there? Where is he? He'd be a useful witness if he's here with you."

Jo smiled sadly at me and said, "No, Matt, I'm sorry. We didn't get him out of there. Before we could find a suit for him, the proximity alerts on the bridge started sounding off. Joe and I sealed him back into the ready room and went back to the bridge. There was still enough equipment functioning for us to see that a number of ships were approaching us. Big ships. Raider ships, just like those the Brakiri had described. We were trapped."

I moved back to the sofa, then emptied my glass in a single gulp and poured more Scotch for both of us. Despite the blazing fire, I still felt cold and the warmth of the spirits sliding down my throat helped. I just wished I hadn't thought about spirits as I looked across at my old friend.

I spoke softly. "Something tells me that this story isn't going to end well, Jo."

She gave me another sad smile. "Then you have been paying attention, haven't you?" She took another sip from her glass, placed it on the table in front of her and continued her story.

"There was no way out. We were outgunned and inside a barely functioning wreck. We couldn't get back to our ship and even if we had, we could have done nothing against the ships approaching us. So we made some quick decisions. We didn't want those bastards capturing our ship, or us. Joe rigged what was left of the Brakiri weapons, and fired on our own ship. It was so sad to see her destroyed like that but it was better than her being taken and used by Raiders."



I was still shivering, chilled to the core by what I was hearing and by what I dreaded was coming next.

"Joe patched together the Brakiri ship self-destruct and we made our way back to the ready room, took off our suits and joined the Brakiri in what we all knew were our last few moments. I'm not going into what was said then; it's private. No one else needs to know how Joe and I said goodbye."

I could see tears sliding down my old friend's face and wondered how I would cope with such a situation. How would I say goodbye to Deborah if I knew we were both going to die? I had no idea and never wanted to find out.

Jo continued, "As we waited for the end, I said to Joe that I wished there was some way of getting a message to my old friend, Matt Gideon, who was now Entil'Zha of the Rangers, as I knew you would find the information we had about the Raiders useful. When I said that, the old Brakiri say up straight and looked at me quizzically. He asked about you and said he'd heard of you from friends on a planet called Eriadne. I'd never heard of it, but the old man said you know it well and had visited recently?"

Jo looked at me questioningly and I nodded. "Just got back from there a couple of months ago. That's where the smugglers were getting the weapons from. We shut down the source, now we're closing in on the participants." I sat back in my sofa and gestured for her to continue.

Taking another slug of her Scotch, Jo said, "I really don't understand this next bit, Matt. The old Brakiri said he could arrange for me to spend some time with you. He said it was only because of the comet passing through Aldhanab and your experiences on Eriadne that he could do this and he had no idea how much time I'd have with you, but he could try. Then he went into some sort of trance. Just don't ask me to describe what happened next. I heard Joe say that the Raiders were on final approach and that we had seconds before self-destruct and then..."

Jo paused and frowned. She tilted her head to one side and asked, "Don't you get it yet, Matt? Do I look like a ghost to you? Because that's what I think I am. I felt a flash of pain as the ship exploded and then somehow I was standing on your doorstep. First I died, and then I was here, on Minbar.

How is that possible? How could that happen? But if I'm a ghost I don't understand how I can be sitting here holding this glass and drinking your very fine Scotch."

I looked across at her and shook my head regretfully. "I don't understand it either, Jo, but I do know that the Brakiri seem able to conjure up some pretty substantial ghosts. I saw one on Eriadne and he looked solid as a rock. But I'd seen him die, even cremated his remains, so I know he was really dead. I'm so sorry, Jo. I wish I could tell you it has all been a bad dream, but I suspect that you, your husband and the old Brakiri really are dead. I don't know how he managed to send you here, but I'm glad he did. I'm glad we got to spend this time together."

I had a fleeting thought that this at least explained Oscar's reaction. It would seem he'd been well aware that there was something very wrong with my guest and had been trying to warn me. But Joanna was no danger to me. She was just a visitor from another place, who'd come to warn me and give me a chance to say goodbye.

Jo nodded, then finished her drink and stood. As she did so, she looked over my shoulder and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Matt, there's a strange man in black robes standing behind you," Jo whispered.

For a moment I thought maybe the assassin I'd wondered about earlier had made it into the house after all, and had been rude enough not to ring the doorbell. I stood and looked back quickly but could see nothing. I sighed. "Tell him if his name's Galen, I'm not interested. I've seen his ghost before and have no desire to see him again."

Joanna laughed. "He says you're being presumptuous again and he'll have to speak to his old partner about punishing you appropriately."

The mention of a partner gave away the identity of the new visitor. "Paedrig."

Jo laughed again. "He says he's glad you remember him. It's been a while."

I muttered something about it not being long enough to forget him—no matter how hard I tried, and Booji knows I'd tried—then figured out just how long it had been since I'd met the ghostly Technomage. He'd made his appearance at Jayden's birth and the boy was now nearly 18. Yes, it had been a while.

I smiled at Jo and asked, "What's he got to say for himself? Last time, he came with messages. Does he have anything to say now? It would make it much easier if he'd just materialize or whatever it is he does."

Jo shook her head. "He says he has to be summoned for that, and you should be well aware of that fact." She paused and looked at me curiously. "He seems a bit cross with you, Matt. What have you done to offend a dead Technomage?"

I sighed and said, "I seem to have a knack of offending ALL Technomages, dead or alive. It's a talent."

Jo smiled at me affectionately and said, "You have a lot of talents, Matt. More than you've ever given yourself credit for."

I snorted at that, as false modesty has never been one of my failings. Most people, including Technomages—dead or alive—would say exactly the opposite.

Before I could comment, Jo went on, "He says it's time for me to go, to be with Joe again, but before I do, he needs to tell you some things."

I kept my silence as Jo went on. "First he says to listen to the warning Galen gave you. You might not like the source, but it was sound advice. Do not put your trust in anyone who has not earned it. Does that make sense?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. But maybe it will in the future."

Joanna nodded then went on, "He also says that this is the last visit from the dead you'll get."

Well, that was good news at least. I'd had more than my fill of ghosts over the years. I was quite happy not to receive any more visitations.

"Apparently, it's only the comet and the Brakiri mystic that made this possible, but now it's time for me to go. He says he's come to make sure I end up where I belong. Should I find that reassuring, Matt? Or not?"

In truth, I hadn't a clue. But I didn't want my friend to know that so I put on my cheeriest smile and said, "Absolutely. You can trust Paedrig completely. He'll take care of you." I mentally crossed my fingers and prayed to Booji that I was telling the truth.

I didn't express my doubts aloud, as I remembered the quote from Lord of the Rings: "Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger." Despite what many people may tell you, I can learn from experience.

My old friend started to fade away, and soon she really did look like a ghost, wraith-like and transparent. Her voice also faded, becoming just a whisper as she bade me farewell. "Maybe I'll see you again on the other side, Matt. Wherever that is. Just get the bastards who killed me, will you?" Her last words were the merest susurrations of sound. "Get them for me."

And she was gone. I stood alone in the room and suddenly it felt warm again. I was no longer shivering, and the fire blazed with heat. I sighed deeply and made my way first to my office where I put the PPG back in my desk, then on to the kitchen, where I opened the door and let Oscar join me.

The dog followed me into the living room and sniffed suspiciously at the couch where Jo had sat, then whined plaintively. I dropped to the opposite sofa and called him over, saying, "I know, boy, I know. It's very strange but she's gone now and everything is OK."

Then I did something I never do. I invited Oscar up onto the sofa next to me, and sat stroking his soft fur, relishing his warmth and the fact that he was alive. I needed that living heat just then. But before I could become maudlin, we both heard the sound of the front door opening, and we both leaped off the sofa and raced for the door.

I just about managed to get it open by pushing my hairy hound out of the way and then it was a race to see who could get to my wife first. As if Oscar ever stood a chance. I swept Deborah into my arms and held her tightly, breathing in her unique aroma, feeling her softness and her strength, rejoicing in the fact that she was warm with life and totally mine.

Of course, Oscar thought he had a share in her too, so eventually I had to let her go long enough for her to make a fuss of him. Then she turned to me with her warm hazel eyes full of concern. "What's the matter, Matthew? You're sad and upset. What's happened?"

I hugged her tightly again, kissing her passionately, then pulled away and smiled at her, feeling as if my heart was about to burst with the love I felt for this glorious woman. "Let's go to bed and I'll tell you all about it. It's definitely a tale for a cold winter's night but I want to be warm and comfortable when I tell it."

Deborah didn't argue; she never does when I suggest going to bed. So we let Oscar out, then settled him down in the kitchen before making our way upstairs. Only after we'd made love and were totally satiated did I finally tell my story of the evening's events.

My wife looked up at me from where her head rested on my shoulder. "Did you love her, Matthew? When you were both young?" She was smiling so I knew there was no hint of resentment or jealousy in her question.

"In a way, maybe I did. But I always thought she was way out of my league. It took me a few more years before I realized that even if I want a woman who's far too smart and beautiful to ever consider me as a partner, I should still go for it." I smiled back at her. "I'm glad I waited."

The look of love in Deborah's eyes said everything, but she whispered anyway, "So am I."

Sleep came slowly that night, as I thought about all the times I'd spent with Joanna, and all the fun we'd had. As I finally drifted into sleep, I sent once last thought into the void.

"I wish you well, Jo, wherever you are now. I hope you're happy. And I will get the bastards who killed you and your husband. I will."

Then I slept.

{Chapter 1}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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