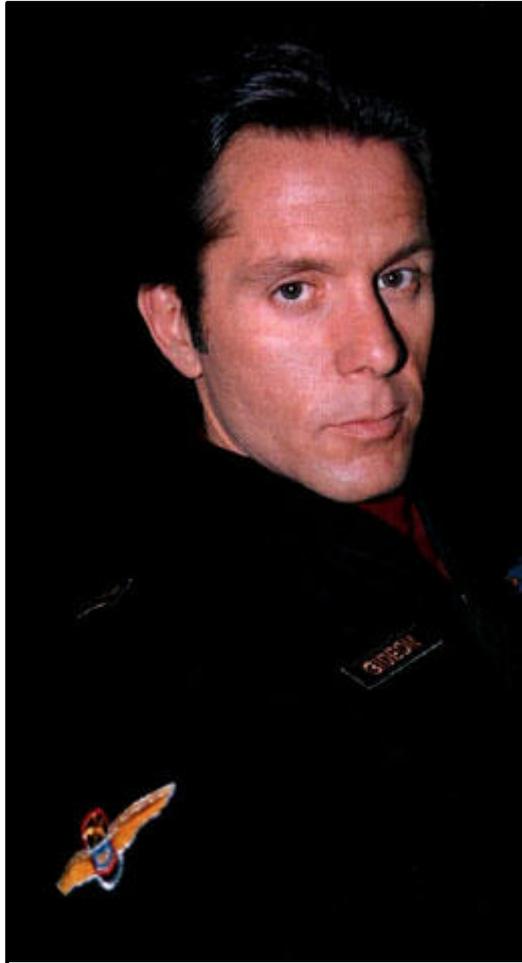


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four I - Part 2: Surrender

by [The Space Witches](#)



Sometimes even Matthew only has one option left: surrender.

Chapter 1

May 2271

"You may as well surrender, there's no hope for you now." I looked up into the expressionless face opposite, hearing the hint of gloating in the voice. I had no idea how I'd gotten myself into that position. It had happened so quickly; one minute everything seemed to be going fine and then... I had to agree, my position was hopeless.

A sound from the next room provided a distraction, and I turned to it with relief. "I'll go." I was up and out of my seat without waiting for a response. As I left the room, I heard a soft chuckle.

"You can run, but you can't hide, Matthew. I'll still be here when you get back and so will this." I paused in the doorway and looked back, as my wife gestured at the chessboard on the table. I

shuddered again as I saw the disaster laid out there. Deborah had lulled me into a false sense of security with a couple of sacrifices, and a few not-so-accidental flashes of her lovely skin, then she'd launched an all out attack that had cleared me off the board. The number of white pieces left standing was pathetic. It was checkmate in a maximum of three moves, and no way out.

I smiled weakly from the doorway to Marcus' bedroom, saying, "We'll have to call it a draw. Marcus needs something."

My charming wife blew a raspberry at me and told me that she'd be waiting to finish off the massacre when I got back. I fled to the sanctuary of my son's bedroom and picked him up from his bed. He was crying softly, and a quick feel of his diaper soon gave me the reason for his waking up in distress. Changing diapers has never been one of my favorite activities, but at that point, anything was better than facing the alternative.

As I cleaned up my son, I wondered why I was masochist enough to play chess with Deborah. She won two out of every three games and did so with a malicious pleasure that belied her usual good nature. She refused to play poker with me, saying that her empathic abilities made it unfair, as she would always know when I was bluffing, so we spent many a quiet evening in our quarters over a friendly game of chess.

Calling our chess games 'friendly' was like calling the nuking of San Diego 'genial'. They were hard fought battles of will and intellect, with the victor showing no mercy. So why did I do it? Maybe because I loved the look of concentration on Deborah's face when she was working out her next moves. Maybe because the way she narrowed her eyes, bit her lip, and pulled at her hair as she was about to move really turned me on. But mostly because, on the occasions when I won, my prize was for her to dress up in the first Christmas present I had ever given her. The too tight red silk corset, the high cut panties, and the whip. What we did after that is none of your business, but I'm sure you can imagine without too much effort.

Marcus was still whimpering softly and his forehead felt warm and sweaty, so when I'd finished changing him, I carried him through to the living area, where Deborah sat waiting for us. "He's not a happy bunny tonight. Any idea why?"

Deborah held her arms out to take him from me, but Marcus shook his head vigorously, winding his free arm around my neck, clutching Half-Ted firmly in his other hand. His words were only just comprehensible, as he mumbled around the teddy bear's ear that was wedged firmly into his mouth. "Want Daddy."

I sat, holding my son to my shoulder, as I said to my wife, "Looks like you get the night off."

Deborah smiled and leaned forward to stroke the hair back from Marcus' forehead. "He's got another tooth coming through. I'll find the teething ring Galen gave us and see if I can pry that bear out of his mouth."

A few minutes and rather a lot of screaming later, Marcus snuggled into my shoulder with the blue bagel shaped ring gripped in his mouth, and Half-Ted pressed between us. Given the amount of slobber previously deposited on the bear's ear, I resigned myself to the resulting damp patch on my T-shirt. I patted my son's back and asked him, "Are you hungry? Thirsty?" I got a vehement shake of the head at each offer. Looking up at his mother, I grinned and asked, "How about a hug from Mummy?"

The shake was even more definite this time. I laughed and said, "You're about the only male on the ship

who'd turn down that offer, and there are a number of females who'd leap at the chance, too."

Deborah blushed and told me not to be silly, then leaned across the table and rested her hand on our son's head. "Definitely cooling off." She smiled fondly at him then looked up at me and said, "I'll be glad when all his teeth are through, but I suspect that before I know it I'll have a son who's taller than I am, and I'll wish he'd stayed a child for longer." Stroking his hair, she continued softly, "I wonder what he'll be when he grows up. Do you think he'll want to be a starship Captain, like his Daddy?"

I laughed and told her that I'd never wanted to follow my father in his career, so why should Marcus? Deborah looked at me, quizzically. "What did your father do? You've never really talked about your parents or your childhood."

I shrugged. "Not a lot to say. Dad was a journalist. Mom was an Earthforce Sergeant Major. She was a Gropo, infantry, the backbone of Earthforce. She'd have been horrified if she'd known that her son became a space case, and an officer at that."

Deborah sat back in her chair and smiled. "Tell me about them, please."

So I leaned back in my chair, and held my two-year-old son close to my chest, then started rambling about my life.

I suspect that no one was more surprised than Mom when a silver-tongued rascal of a journalist called Daniel Temple talked her into having a baby. They'd met when he was assigned to do a story on her unit. She was a Corporal at the time, leading a small team of Gropos. Dad was a young, ruggedly handsome journalist, trying to make a name for himself as a war correspondent for Universe Today. He'd leaped at the chance to get himself attached to a Gropo unit, never dreaming that he'd fall for the Corporal in charge.

After a whirlwind romance, which according to Dad was filled with passion and danger, Mom agreed to take a career break and have a baby. Having got her that far, Dad never could get her to agree to marry him. She'd said that she was the last Gideon in her line and that she wanted her child to carry on the family name. So Martha Gideon and Daniel Temple produced a son, and then discovered that neither of them really wanted to take the time out of their careers to bring him up.

Gran and Gramps Gideon must have been delighted when these two turned up on their doorstep, baby boy in hand, and said, "His name is Matthew, look after him for a while, will you?" It turned out to be eighteen years later before they got rid of me.

During those eighteen years Mom and Dad would arrive on visits--Mom's always carefully planned and scheduled, Dad's always unexpected and exciting--and they'd take me away for a few days, spoil me rotten, then return me to my grandparents for them to sort out the mess they'd just made of me.

By the time I was old enough to realize that this wasn't the way most kids grew up, I'd come to enjoy it. The quiet times with Gran and Gramps were like periods of calm and stability between the fun filled storms of my parent's visits. I can only remember a couple of occasions when they turned up together, and to be honest, I didn't like it when that happened. I didn't know which one of them to pay attention to, and I resented them paying attention to each other rather than me. It was much more fun when Dad would turn up out of the blue, always with the latest cool toy as a gift, and whisk me out of school for a few days, to be hopelessly indulged somewhere totally unsuitable for a kid of my age.

I was playing poker before I was ten, and Dad snuck me into one of the casinos in New Vegas to celebrate my fourteenth birthday. I'm not going to tell you what he got me for my sixteenth birthday, but it was an experience, that's for sure. None of the girls in my school looked like... never mind.

Mom's visits were less exciting. She always made sure she came in school holidays, and the places she took me were much more suitable, but I still had a great time visiting places like Mount Rushmore and the museums in Washington DC with her. Dad may have taken me to New Vegas, but Mom took me on my first trip to Disneyplanet. I remember how proud I was when she showed me the Medal of Honor she'd won in the Dilgar War, and when I pinned the Sergeant-Major insignia to her uniform.

I guess Dad's influence was the stronger of the two though, as I grew up wanting to be a croupier in a casino. The idea of getting paid to gamble all day, while watching the showgirls dance naked, was irresistible to an over-sexed adolescent like me. Gran and Gramps persuaded me that a college education wouldn't be such a bad idea, but in my first year of college, the Earth Minbari war broke out.

Less than a month later, we got the news that Mom was dead.

I looked over at my wife and could see that her eyes had filled with tears. As an empath, she was picking up on the pain I still felt, over twenty years after my mother's death. I reached out to wipe the tears from her face, then took her hand and squeezed it. Deborah smiled at me sadly and asked me to go on.

I don't know why it came as such a shock when it happened. By then Mom was a Sergeant Major leading a crack team of Gropos, and I knew that she'd be in the front line, but somehow I'd thought she was immortal. I thought even the Minbari couldn't kill Martha Gideon, the most fearsome fighter of them all.

By the time the war started, Dad was working at ISN, and he got the news that the unit Mom led had been wiped out before it came over the official channels. He dropped everything and left Geneva immediately, coming to tell my grandparents and me himself, not wanting us to find out through the usual message from Earthforce. I'll always be grateful for that, but even so, I went mad with grief and anger at what had happened.

Gran, Gramps and Dad all tried to stop me, but the following day I enlisted with Earthforce. As it turned out, if I hadn't, within a few months I would have been drafted anyway. At least by enlisting, I was able to enter the officer's training program, and I spent six months learning how to be an officer and a gentleman. Somehow, I never got the hang of the latter part. Must have been Dad's genes coming through. I have no doubt that Mom is sighing with disappointment somewhere in the afterlife, but I know damn well she loves me anyway. I'm as much her son as I am my father's.

I was an Ensign on the Hunter, a Nova Class Corvette assigned to protect Mars, when the Minbari went straight past us and attacked Earth. My Captain went crazy, trying to get our orders changed so we could join the Battle of the Line, but communications were in total chaos. By the time he decided to defy his orders and join in anyway, the battle was over. The Minbari had surrendered on the brink of wiping out Earth. We never knew why.

After the war, I was sent back to Earthforce academy, to finish off the training I should have been given earlier, but which had been shortened by the need to get officers out into ships during the war. Life at the academy was a breeze. We had rations even when civilians were hurting, and promotion prospects in Earthforce had never been better than in the immediate aftermath of the war. So many good people had been lost that for those of us who were left, the future looked pretty damned good. We just tried hard to forget that the reason we were doing so well was the people who should have been in the ranks above us were all atoms scattered across space, or pushing up daisies in some far corner of a foreign field.

Being in Earthforce also gave me the chance to help Gran and Gramps when times were tough. After the war, Earth's economy was in nearly as bad shape as it was during the quarantine for the Drakh plague. Rebuilding took a long time, and the government was channeling money into the Babylon projects, so a lot of people on Earth were suffering. Dad was OK at ISN, but I was able to get rations to my grandparents to help them get through those first few months.

Gran never really recovered from Mom's death, and she died within a few months of the end of the war. Gramps moved into a retirement community and put their house in trust for me, until I was thirty. He said he hoped that by then I'd have grown up enough not to put it up as a stake in a poker game. I guess he was right, as I still own that house, and one day, I plan to go back and raise my son there, just like they raised me.

Deborah smiled at me again. "One day we'll do just that, but I don't think Marcus is suffering from his current life."

I looked down at my son, who was still snuggled into my chest. "I think he's just about asleep. Shall I put him back to bed?"

Deborah shook her head. "He's dozing, but not quite asleep. He loves the sound of your voice, you know. When he has his head against your shoulder, he can hear you talking and feel the vibrations in your chest. It makes him feel very safe and secure. Marcus knows that everything is going to be all right, if his Daddy is holding him."

I kissed the top of my son's head and smiled at her as she continued, "So what happened next? You were still an Ensign when you were on the Cerberus, and that was over ten years after the end of the Minbari war. What happened to all those wonderful career prospects?"

I should have known Deborah would pick up on that issue. She could always spot the flaw in the logic and the weak point in the story. I explained my somewhat erratic career.

"I was an Ensign *again* rather than *still*. I'd made it to Lieutenant Commander on the Vesta, but then the Captain and I had a small misunderstanding about a card school I was running. He threatened to have me thrown out of Earthforce, but in the end they couldn't prove that the games I was running were rigged, which they weren't, of course," I decided to ignore the skeptical expression on Deborah's face, "but they busted me back to Ensign to make a point. I was transferred to the Cerberus, and put in charge of the recycling plant. Captain Ross wasn't exactly delighted at the prospect of having me on his crew. I often wonder..."

I stopped myself, before I went further. I'd spent too many nights wondering if that had been why I'd been picked to lead that repair team. Had Lou Ross known that he might have to leave us behind? Had

he considered me expendable? I was the black sheep on his ship, and he'd probably decided that he'd rather lose me than one of the officers who'd kept their noses clean.

I sat and brooded for a while, stroking Marcus' back as he leaned against my shoulder, lost in my own dark thoughts of that time. The touch of Deborah's hand on my face brought me back to the present. "He's asleep now. Do you want to put him to bed?" She ran her fingers down my cheek, and I leaned my face into her hand, closing my eyes as I breathed in her scent. Deborah always smelled so good.

I opened my eyes and smiled across the table at her. "In a minute. I like holding him. It's like cuddling a hot water bottle or a puppy. Very comforting."

Deborah laughed softly. "Was your father still alive then? When you came back after the Cerberus was destroyed?"

I nodded. "He was a senior executive at ISN by then. Gramps had died a couple of years before, but I still kept in touch with Dad, and when I got leave, we'd go off carousing together. He always knew where to find the best games in town. He never did marry or have another family. Dad once told me that he'd loved my mother too much to ever consider a long-term relationship with another woman, but that didn't stop him having a lot of short-term arrangements. By the time I joined the Agamemnon, most of his conquests were younger than me and stunningly beautiful. I could only watch in envy and amazement, as he dated one gorgeous woman after another. I always thought he'd die when he was shot by a jealous husband." I smiled in fond memory of my scoundrel father.

"And did he?" Deborah broke the silence that had lingered after my last words. A comfortable, companionable silence, the kind we both enjoyed when I got home after my shift. Deborah always seemed to understand when I needed to talk and when I just wanted to sit, with my arms around her, holding her close and enjoying the peace and contentment that I got from having her and Marcus with me. I knew what I was doing when I fell in love with an empath.

"No. I don't know exactly how he died. All I know is that when President Clark sent in troops to shut down ISN in 2260, Dad disappeared along with most of the other senior ISN staff. I've never been able to find out exactly what happened, but news got out later that everyone in authority at ISN, including Dad, was executed for treason. The bodies were never found."

Deborah stood and walked around the table, taking me into her arms and hugging me gently. She didn't say anything, just held me, sending waves of love that wrapped my son and me in a warm cocoon of affection and devotion. I *really* knew what I was doing when I fell in love with an empath. After a few moments, I looked up at her and smiled, saying, "Come on, let's put this little one to bed."

She let me go, and I stood and carried Marcus through to his bedroom, with Deborah following me closely. She pulled the covers back, and I laid Marcus down, letting her tuck the covers in around our son. As she straightened, I put my arm around Deborah's waist and kissed her cheek. "I give up. I admit it, you won, and I lost. So what do you want as your victory prize?" There was no way I was going back to finish that damned game of chess.

Deborah turned in my arms and kissed me, gently at first, then opening her mouth, touching my lips with her tongue, filling the kiss with passion and promise. After a few moments, I broke for breath and looked into her golden brown eyes, eyes that were burning with need and desire. I love it when she looks at me like that, as I know there is no one else in this universe who she'll ever look at in that way, and I know exactly what she wants.

She wants me. All of me. In her arms, in her bed, in her. What's a man to do?

I surrendered.

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four I

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