

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four U - Part 1: Loose Ends

by The Space Witches



There's a whole universe waiting to be explored.

Chapter 1

July 2273

"It's time. I have to go." John kissed Lily's forehead as she sat curled up in his lap, at the same time squeezing Luke's hand. The three adults had come together for comfort on the sofa in Lily's rooms, after putting the children to bed. They had said little, clinging to each other for consolation at their losses.

John knew that Lily's pain was the deepest. Her link to her sisters had been severed, and for

the first time in the life she could remember, she was without their company. Her love for her men and her children would help sustain her through the pain, but it wouldn't make it go away. John knew he was now making that pain worse by leaving her when she needed him most, but he felt he had no choice.

He had delayed carrying out this task until Matthew had left the ship, not wanting his former Captain and friend to know what he was about to do. Matthew would never have understood, and would never have approved. So John had planned in secret, and now it was time.

"Do you have to?" Lily looked up at him, her emerald green eyes liquid with unshed tears, her voice pleading.

John tried to smile as he kissed her cheek. "I suppose I don't have to, but I need to do this. It's unfinished business. It's a loose end I have to tie off before I can start my new life."

And what a new life it was going to be. Captain of the Excalibur, the flagship of the Inter-Stellar Alliance. Even in his childhood dreams of a career in Earthforce, he had never dared to imagine something like this. To be able to have all that *and* the love of two people like Lily and Luke *and* three beautiful children... Sometimes, when no one was looking, John surreptitiously pinched himself, just to prove it was all real.

Luke squeezed his hand in return, and spoke softly in the deep voice John loved so much. "Go do what you have to do. I understand the desire to complete things before moving on. That's why I needed to see Sara before joining you both here on the Excalibur. I just wish I could believe that your visit will be as pleasant."

John shook his head. "No, it won't be pleasant, but I need to do it. I owe him. It's time to repay my debt, if I can. If he'll let me. Once we leave Earth orbit, I have no idea when we'll be back in this part of the galaxy. By the time we come back it may be too late. It has to be now."

Lily hugged him tightly and raised her mouth to be kissed. "Then go and get it over with. How long will you be?"

John glanced at the clock on the wall. It was late evening ship's time, and Matthew, Demon, Angel and Marcus had been gone for several hours. Already it felt like a lifetime. A wave of uncertainty swept over John. Could he really do the job Matthew had left for him? Could he really live up to his mentor's expectations? Could he really cope without Matthew's advice and guidance?

The new Captain of the Excalibur pushed his doubts aside and answered Lily's question. "It's just about dawn in Geneva now. I only need a couple of hours down there, I think, so I should be back by the time you wake up in the morning." With one last kiss of Lily's forehead, and a soft touch of Luke's lips, John hauled himself up from the sofa.

He paused at the mirror by the door to their quarters, and checked that his uniform was tidy. John's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the new bars on his shoulders. Captain's bars. Something he'd never thought to see there. A wave of pride and gratitude replaced all the uncertainties he'd experienced a few moments before. He *would* do a good job. He *would* live up to Matthew's expectations.

John stood staring out of the window of the featureless room, gazing down on the scene of so many uncomfortable memories. Some of the worst moments of his life had been spent in this place, as well as some of the best. Memories of Marcela flooded his mind, sweeping away thoughts of the unhappy years he'd spent in the courtyard below, after his talent had emerged.

Sometimes he thought Marcela had saved his life, or perhaps what she had saved was his soul. It had been in danger of shriveling and dying inside him before he met her. She had shown him that life and love were still possible, even for telepaths. It was a lesson he'd hung onto, even after the Corps had taken her from him. From that moment on, despite the appalling pain of losing Marcela, John had never quite stopped believing that somewhere, someday, he could be happy again.

"Well, well. What have we here? What does an Earthforce officer want with an old war criminal like me?"

The voice behind John was harsh and bitter, but what else had he expected? This was a man whose lifetime had been spent working toward one goal, and at the end, he had been defeated. Who wouldn't be bitter at having lost so much?

John turned and tried to find it in his heart to feel sorry for the old man facing him. This man was ending his life in prison, all his hopes and dreams come to nothing, drugged with sleepers to prevent him ever hurting anyone again. This man had killed too often, seen death's doors open for him too many times. Rumor had it that he had lost his soul from doing too many death-bed scans. It was the only explanation people could think of for why one man could kill so often and so easily.

John tried to smile, but his face felt frozen as he looked closely at the other man. "I came to thank you. I should have thanked you when you saved my life six years ago, but I didn't. I'm sorry about that, and I may not get the chance again, so I'm here to thank you now."

Alfred Bester looked old, far older than could be accounted for by the six years that had elapsed since they had last met. His hair was white, as was the small beard he now wore, but it wasn't those features that aged him. It was his eyes. Those dark, deep eyes, which had always shone with intelligence and wit, even when he was committing the most atrocious acts. Those eyes now looked dead. John wondered whether it was the sleepers that had killed the light in those eyes, or was it Bester's final defeat and capture? Either way, John shivered slightly. He felt as if he were talking to a dead man. Again, rumor had it that the old man had mind-wiped a mundane, a woman who had loved him and who he had loved in turn, before his final capture. Was that what had killed the final spark of humanity?

"Lieutenant... No, I see it's now *Captain* Matheson! Such an unpleasant surprise. News of your latest promotion hadn't found its way inside these prison walls as yet. Do I assume it's a recent event? It's too much to hope that it's temporary, of course."

Bester smiled but only with his mouth, and to John it looked more like a snarl. The old man went on, "Did your mother never teach you that it isn't polite to gloat over your fallen enemies, *Captain* Matheson?" The title was an insult in Bester's mouth.

John gritted his teeth, and kept his voice level as he replied, "My mother never had the chance

to teach me much of anything, Mr. Bester. I was taken from her as a small child, and I never saw her again. The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father. Remember?"

Bester laughed, a croaky, harsh sounding noise. It sounded as if he hadn't laughed at anything for a very long time. "Touché, Captain. Touché."

The old man shuffled across the room and lowered himself gingerly into one of the two chairs placed by the window. John knew he was now eighty-four years old, and he showed every year of his long and lonely life. It hadn't been that way when they had met six years before. At that time he had looked more like a man in his fifties than his late seventies. John wondered what had changed so much. Was it the sleepers? He'd heard awful things about the effects the drugs had on telepaths, both short and long-term, and the living proof appeared to be sitting in front of him.

For a moment, John felt angry at what was being done to this man. Yes, he was a war criminal, yes, he had committed atrocities, but the punishment now being meted upon him could be classed as cruel and unusual. To deprive a teep of his powers was like stopping up a musician's ears, or removing a singer's voice. It was wrong. The problem was that a man like Bester was too dangerous to be allowed to keep his powers. He was too strong, and had no compunctions about using his abilities to kill.

Sighing softly to himself, John sat in the other chair and looked sadly at Bester. "You may not believe it, but I didn't come to gloat. I honestly wanted to thank you for saving my life. If you hadn't helped me that time on Tarriff's Colony, I wouldn't have survived to achieve happiness. Is it gloating to tell you how happy I am? To tell you that in some part that joy is due to you? I didn't think so, but if you feel that way, I'll leave."

John started to rise from his seat, but Bester waved him back down. "Wait. Don't go just yet. I have few enough diversions to pass away the hours these days. My jailers no doubt think it's appropriate to give me plenty of time to dwell on the gravity of my offenses, but even I can't spend all my time going over fond memories of my happier days as a Psi Cop."

John shook his head in exasperation, but lowered himself back into the chair, saddened that Bester seemed utterly unashamed of what he had done with his life. Even now, the old Psi Cop appeared to believe he had been right. Was there any way he could convince Bester that things were better for telepaths today than under the old Psi Corps? John felt he had to try.

"They may have been happier days for you as a Psi Cop, but did you ever wonder what life was like for the rest of us? For the lower powers. For the P3s, P4s and P5s, who had all their choices taken from them? Who were told where to work, where to live, who to marry, who to love, who not to love..." John broke off and stood abruptly. The memories revived by being in this place were too painful after all. He started to leave, when Bester's voice halted him.

For the first time, there seemed a note of regret in the old man's voice. "Even Psi Cops didn't have those choices. It was the price we paid, all of us telepaths, of whatever power, for being the next step in the evolutionary process. We represent the birth of a new species, John Matheson, and all births are painful. The mundanes will never understand the price we have paid, or know what we have suffered. Even now, you and I have more in common with each other than we will ever share with a mundane."

John shook his head in denial, sitting once more and leaning forward, trying to explain to this bitter old man so he would truly understand. "I don't believe that. That's not how it is or how it has ever been for me, and there are far more teeps like me than there ever were like you, Bester. Teeps who wanted more. Teeps who feel that what we have is a gift, not a weapon. Our ability is like a sculptor who can look at a block of stone and see the statue inside. We're like musicians who hear music in our heads and who can play it for everyone to hear and enjoy. We're not another species, we just have something extra--something different. It doesn't mean that we can't lead normal, happy lives."

Bester shook his head. "You're wrong. We are so much more than that. You've allowed yourself to be brainwashed by the 'normals' into living their lies, living at their level. Don't sell yourself short, John Matheson. You are so much more than they are or can ever be."

John found his temper was rising. Useless as it was, he needed to explain to this old man why he was so wrong. He leaped to his feet again, and started pacing the visiting room, unconsciously imitating his mentor, Matthew Gideon, who always paced when he was frustrated or angry.

"If that were true, why was I so unhappy in the Corps, and why has my life been so much better since the Corps was disbanded?" Bester tried to interrupt, but John shook his head, "No, let me finish. I've heard your point of view often enough. It was drummed into me as a child. Now listen to me. Listen to someone who has experienced it from both sides: inside the Psi Corps and out of it."

To John's surprise, Bester sat back, silent, apparently willing to listen. Summoning his thoughts, John went on. "In the Corps I could only dream of the life I really wanted. I wanted to be in Earthforce, to travel the stars, to explore..." He laughed softly as he remembered the tag line from an old TV series, "strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go..."

Bester shook his head and said softly, "A child's fantasies."

John stopped pacing and glared at the older man. "Not for a 'normal'. Not for the mundanes who you despise so much. They could have those dreams, while all I had was a future as a commercial telepath, employed by some faceless corporation, sent where they wanted me to go, lucky if I even got to travel to Mars, with little chance of ever seeing the stars. I could look forward to a loveless marriage to a woman who was genetically matched to me but who cared nothing for me, and we could breed more little telepaths to live the same loveless, soul-destroying life to which I was condemned. Is it any wonder that I and teeps like me thought of our powers as a curse, rather than a gift? There were times when I was growing up that I would gladly have cut my own head open and ripped that power out of my brain if I could."

Bester looked almost startled by the vehemence with which John spoke. The Captain found that his old emotions of despair and loneliness had swept through him again as he spoke, driving his words from him with a passion he rarely allowed himself. He brought himself back under control and continued more quietly.

"When Psi Corps was disbanded, a new life opened up for me. It wasn't perfect by any means. The bi-annual scans were painful and embarrassing, but that was a price I was happy to pay

at first, in exchange for the life I wanted. The career in Earthforce I'd only dreamed of before."

Bester interrupted, his lip curling in disdain. "The mundanes forced those scans on you, didn't they? To make sure you were a good little boy, obeying all their rules."

John turned and snarled at the old man. "They may have been ordered by mundanes, but they were carried out by teeps, most of whom had once been Psi Cops. And those scans were carried out with a force and brutality that went far beyond what was required by the regulations. It was teeps who hurt me during that time, Bester, not 'normals'. It was a 'mundane' who freed me from that pain and humiliation, not a fellow telepath. A mundane who helped me for the sake of friendship, and nothing more. No teep ever helped me like that. They only wanted to hurt me and destroy me, not to help."

John knew he was being unfair. There was one other telepath who had helped John, a man nearly as old as Bester, but as different from him as two men could be. Alden Catches still maintained regular contact with John's family and they considered him a friend. He pushed those thoughts aside and continued with his tirade.

"Telepaths only ever brought me pain." The thought flashed through his mind, [Forgive me, Marcela, but it's true. In the end, all I had left of you was the pain.] "Mundanes have made me happy. A mundane, Matthew Gideon, helped me, mentored me, and brought me to where I am today, Captain of the flagship of the ISA. Another mundane--an old acquaintance of yours: John Sheridan--helped Matthew free me from the tyranny of the Joneses. Two more mundanes, my wife Lily, and my husband Luke, have given me more happiness than you have ever known in your life, Bester. And they have given me more. They have given me three beautiful children, who I love more than I could ever have believed possible.

"None of this would have been possible if your Psi Corps had still existed. You would have denied me all this if you could. How can *you* justify that?"

Bester looked sad, then waved at the window by which he sat. "Take a look out of the window, John. Teeptown still exists. It's still a ghetto where teeps who haven't been as fortunate as you can retreat. We are still hated and persecuted by many. The Corps protected telepaths from persecution, and punished those who hurt us. That was my job as a Psi Cop. Who does that job now, John? Who protects the innocents?"

The old man rose painfully from his seat, and reached out his clenched left fist to rest it on John's arm. "I'm glad that you're happy. All I ever wanted was for my people to be happy. But you are the exception, not the rule. Telepaths are still suffering. My people, my children, are still harassed. Now, I have no power to prevent it or to penalize the guilty. To use your analogy, I am the sculptor who has been blinded. I am the musician who can no longer hear or play the music. I can only watch from my window and see my people suffer. How can you justify that?"

John shook his head sadly, too honest to deny what Bester had said. He knew that telepaths still suffered prejudice; he'd been a victim himself often enough. But he believed there were good people in the world, too. People like Matthew Gideon and John Sheridan, who would always do what was right, when they could.

"I don't have all the answers, Bester. I just know that what we have now is better than Psi

Corps. For me it's a lot better, although I know that for many, it's only marginal. But it *is* better. We have more freedom now than we had under Psi Corps."

Bester snorted softly. "It's an illusion. One day they'll turn on you, and without people like me to protect you, my people will be destroyed. Go on with your happy life, John Matheson. Enjoy it while you can. To quote that old TV series you mentioned earlier," Bester paused and raised his right hand, his fingers split into a V shape, "Live long and prosper, Captain Matheson, but never forget that the freedoms that have been given to you can so very easily be taken away."

Sighing, Bester shuffled toward the door. "Now, I'm an old man, and I need my rest. I haven't enjoyed an argument so much in a long time. So you have my thanks, John Matheson. Let that make you happy, if you like. You brought a little joy into Al Bester's life, a little entertainment to my bleak existence. But don't tell anyone. There are many people, mundanes and teeps alike, who would hate you for that kindness. Watch your thoughts. Guard them closely. You never know who might be listening."

With a last malicious smile, Bester shambled out of the visiting room, leaving John standing by the window. He turned and looked out again, seeing what he hadn't seen before. Bester was right in one respect. Teep town was still there, a refuge for those who found the outside world an unhappy place.

John gave silent thanks that he wasn't one of them, and turned to leave.

Standing in the light from the doorway, John looked down at his sleeping lovers and smiled. This was what made it all worthwhile. This was what gave real meaning to his life. If he lost everything else, the rank, the position, the career, everything, it wouldn't matter as long as he still had his family. That was what a man like Bester could never understand.

He undressed quickly, and slid into the bed, well aware that his shift on the bridge started in an hour, but needing this time with his lovers, just wanting their company and the warmth of their bodies close to his.

Lily stirred in her sleep and rolled to her other side, entwining herself around John without waking. Luke also turned onto his side, wrapping himself around Lily's back, and lifting his arm to enclose both Lily and John in his embrace.

John sighed with contentment and closed his eyes. In an hour he would start his first full shift as Captain, and with it his new life. He could do so content that he had tied up all the loose ends of his old life. His life in Psi Corps would always exist, but it no longer had any hold over him. Like the old man down on Earth, it was now powerless to harm him.

A smile played around his lips as he whispered, "To boldly go where no teep has gone before."

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