

The Witches of Eriadne: *Interlude Five B - Part 2: Homecoming*

by *The Space Witches*



A Brakiri sweet

Chapter 6

27th September 2288

Day of the Dead

Matthew Gideon

Deborah and I went up to the wedding suite, which were a set of rooms I hadn't seen before. Of course, they weren't really a wedding suite; we'd just taken to calling them that as they were the rooms where Angel and Jack had stayed before and immediately after their wedding. They were handsome rooms: white walls and ceilings, with rich blue soft furnishings, matching rugs and comfortable furniture. The living room and bedroom had west facing windows overlooking the fields outside the castle, giving marvelous views of the spectacular sunsets that were Eriadne's specialty.

As we'd ascended the stairs and approached the suite, I'd asked Deborah why she hadn't chosen rooms overlooking the inner court, so we could look directly down on the area we wanted to surveille, without the need for Angel's balls of sight. She'd told me that none of the rooms facing inwards had connecting bathrooms, and she hadn't wanted to have to go wandering around cold castle corridors if she needed to pee in the middle of the night. I guess that was a fair enough reason, as unlike me she wasn't equipped to piss out of the window if necessary. Although imagining her trying to do so made me smile.

We got ourselves settled and I got my first view of what Angel had set up for us. It's seriously weird to look at what seems to be a window that hangs in mid-air in the middle of the room. Stand in front of it and you could look straight through it into the courtyard. Move to the side, and just like a window, the view gradually shifted, until fully sideways on it disappeared completely. If you moved around the back, it wasn't there at all.

As I said, weird.

I did try sticking my hand through the opening, and that got even weirder. My hand disappeared as it crossed the threshold. I could still feel it, I could waggle my fingers around, but it looked as if my hand ended at the wrist. I wondered if someone standing in the courtyard would see a disembodied hand dangling in mid-air. I made a mental note to ask Angel about that sometime. I didn't ask my wife as she would have just looked at me as if I was stupid. I hate it when she looks at me like that, because generally she's right.

When I withdrew my hand I checked it carefully and everything still seemed to be attached. I did consider sticking my head through, just to see what happened but decided against it when I heard my wife muttering something about 'elephant child'. Maybe it was a warning, maybe she was just teasing, but for once I decided discretion was the better part of valor. I'm not a Drazi, after all.

Deborah took the first watch, so I moved over to the window to look at the sun slowly descending towards the horizon. There's some element in the atmosphere of Eriadne—John tried to explain it to me once but I stopped listening about ten words in, as I just wasn't that interested—that glows orange and yellow as the sun's rays hit it at a certain angle. Yes, I managed to listen to that much—elements, sun, angle—before I switched off. I'm not completely stupid.

No heckling from the gallery, please.

Anyway, the effect is that on any day when there's no rain and not too much cloud, the sunset is amazing. So I watched out of the west facing window as the sun dipped, enjoying the view while I could.

Inevitably, I was interrupted. My commlink went off, and I hit the control, saying, "Gideon. Go."

Hjalmar's voice emerged. He sounded a little strained as he said, "There's something odd going on down in the town. This window thing lets us see as far as the first few houses, and there are a lot of people gathering down there. Some of them are carrying big sticks with things hanging from them. They're not approaching the castle, but I thought you should know."

More weirdness.

As I couldn't adjust the view I could get from the room I was in, if I wanted to know more I would need to go down and take a look from the observation point that Angel had set up in the guardroom. Either that or climb up to the battlements that overlooked the town. It was a long climb and the view would probably be better through the 'window' anyway, so I decided to go down to the guardroom.

"Will you be OK if I go down and see what's going on?" I asked my wife and she smiled and nodded at the PPG I'd left, fully loaded, on the table next to the sofa where she was sitting.

"Between this and my knives, I'm sure I'll be fine. Just knock and call out before you open the door when you come back. I don't want to injure any parts of you that I might want to use later."

I laughed and blew her a kiss, checked that I had my spare PPG tucked into my left armpit, then left the room, closing the door behind me. The corridor was flooded with orange light from the west facing window at one end, but as I stepped towards the door at the other end, the sun dropped beneath the horizon and the light started to fade. I reached for a light switch to illuminate the passageway better, but hesitated when I saw a strange red and black wavering field covering the far door. Looking around in the dusk, I could see that every door in the corridor was lit up by the same red and black glow. I reached out to touch the door nearest to me, and immediately withdrew my hand. The red light was cold. Cold enough to burn.

I was just reaching out again when a voice spoke from behind me.

"You know, Matthew, doing something over and over again and expecting a different result is one definition of madness. I believe Einstein said that but there is significant debate about the authenticity of the attribution."

The voice was unmistakable. Deep, sonorous and with a strong English accent. Pompous, too. There was just one problem. The person who used to speak with that voice was dead.

I'd watched him die on this planet, over eight years before. Now, I don't believe in ghosts. Or at least I didn't until I was presented with a dead Technomage back when Sarah and Alwyn's son, Jayden, was born. As a child of a Technomage it seemed that a full coven was required for his birth, and it had included Alwyn's dead Mage ex-partner, Paedrig.

Paedrig had given me a message from the Captain and crew of the Cerberus, the ship that had been destroyed by the Shadows leaving me hanging alone in space, from where I'd been rescued by the man who now seemed to be standing directly behind me. This despite the fact that he was dead.

I mean really dead. Dropped off of a cliff then his ship dropped on top of him dead. You don't get much deader than the bits of him we'd recovered and cremated later.

Yet when I slowly turned around, there he was, large as life and twice as arrogant. And still bald.



Galen. The man who'd saved my life on countless occasions and who'd tried to murder my wife and daughter. The man I'd once counted as a friend, but who I'd learned to hate for what he did to my family.

I only had one thing to say to Galen. "Go to hell. Whichever hell you came from. It was bad enough having you hanging around when you were alive. I really don't want you haunting me now you're dead."

His mobile face broke into a grin. "I'm afraid that neither of us has any choice in the matter, Matthew. For tonight, we are stuck with each other." He waved at the red wavering light that covered every door. "That field is as deep as the distance

between here and Brakir. It's as cold as the vacuum of deep space. You cannot cross that field. No one outside this corridor can hear you. You know what they say about space, don't you, Matthew? No one can hear you scream."

That was just what I needed. Images of face huggers and things bursting out of chests flitted across my mind, to be dismissed with a quick shake of the head. "What's going on here, Galen? Why are you here? How are you here?"

Galen sighed and leaned his staff against one of the walls. I happen to know that his staff had been destroyed, but it seems that staffs can have ghosts, too, or at least Technomage staffs can. "When the comet makes its closest approach to their planet, the Brakiri celebrate the Day of the Dead. I suppose, more accurately, it should be called the Night of the Dead, but then again, it's a Brakiri tradition, so they can call it what they like. Whatever you want to call it, on this night, each person who is alone receives a visit from a lost soul. A soul who has something they need to say. Something important. That is why I'm here, Matthew. I need to speak to you."

*My first instinct was to say that I didn't need to speak to him, and to tell him to go to hell again. But that was just going to get Einstein quoted at me again. I wondered for a moment why I didn't get Einstein's ghost coming to see me. Why didn't *he* have something important to say to me? But I guess Einstein is a very popular ghost and I don't rate such a visitor. I had to make do with a Technomage whom no one else could possibly have wanted.*

So I raised the objection that I'd been thinking of. "But that only happens when a comet approaches Brakir, and that's only once every two hundred years. The last time it took place was twenty-five years or so ago. How can it occur again, here and now?"

Galen shrugged. I'd always hated it when he did that. "The Brakiri make the rules, not me. It would seem that a comet approaching any of their colonies can produce the same effect. Do you really want to spend the night discussing Brakiri religion and mysticism? Is it that important? Surely what matters is that we are here, now, and we have nowhere to go until dawn."

I ignored him and tried my commlink, just getting a burst of static. Galen sighed; something else that had always used to annoy me. "Can you reach Brakir with your commlink? I don't think so. Why would you expect it to work when the distance between you and everything else on this planet is currently the same as between you and Brakir?"

I didn't want to even try to get my head round the physics of that, so I turned to the door of the room where I'd just left my wife. I raised my hand to hammer on the door, when Galen warned, "That's not a good idea, Matthew. It will hurt."

I went ahead anyway, and he was right. It hurt a lot. I'd forgotten just how irritating Galen could be when he was right. I waved my injured hand around, trying to get feeling back into my fingers, then turned back to face the Mage standing behind me in the corridor. "Deborah is in there. I need to know she's OK."

Galen nodded and his smile seemed almost sympathetic. "She is unharmed, as are all the occupants of the castle. Anyone who was alone as the sun set will be visited by someone who has passed

beyond; someone who was significant in their lives and wishes to communicate with them. We all have messages to give to the people we visit, Matthew. That is why we have come."

I faced Galen and stared him down. "The timing sucks, Galen. We have a situation on our hands here. The townspeople could try to attack the castle tonight, and I need to be somewhere where I can see what's going on, not stuck in a corridor with a dead Technomage!" I might have been shouting a bit by then, as Galen took a step back and tried to calm me.

"Nothing will happen tonight, Matthew. The local population is far too occupied with visits from their own dead. Which, by the way, they welcome and they don't waste half the night complaining about the inconvenience."

Galen was looking seriously pissed off by the time he stopped speaking, and I did pause to wonder whether a dead Mage was as dangerous as a living one. I decided that erring on the side of safety might not be a bad idea. Maybe next time I see Alwyn I'll ask him; then again maybe I don't need to know the answer.

"Are you sure everyone is safe? No harm will come to Deborah or anyone else in the castle or down at the spaceport? I need your word on this, Galen. You don't exactly have a good record where harm to my wife is concerned."

Galen closed his eyes, and his face fell into sorrowful lines. "You have my word, Matthew. I made some terrible mistakes when I was alive. I recognize that now. Since I've been dead, everyone I have ever loved has told me how wrong I was in my vendetta against the sisters and particularly against your wife. That is why I am here. I have come to apologize. I need your forgiveness."

I looked him straight in the eye—trying hard not to spit in it—threw caution to the winds and slowly shook my head.

"Never going to happen. You barely failed in killing my wife and my daughter, Galen and not for want of trying. You destroyed the bond between my daughter and her mother, and it's taken years for them to rebuild their relationship. Your hatred and your complete inability to understand that my wife and her sisters were victims of the Vorlons, not allies, has had consequences that didn't end with your death.

"Do you really expect to just say, 'sorry' and think that I'll go, 'that's OK'? No, Galen, no. Too much pain, too much suffering, too much sadness, too many tears because of you. It's not OK. You're not forgiven. You never will be."

Galen sighed and his body slumped. I knew I'd disappointed him and I was glad. He deserved to suffer. He'd injured so many people I loved because of his intolerance and complete lack of empathy. His death had been too quick; he deserved worse. I could only hope that he still suffered wherever he was after death, and that he would continue to do so.

Does that make me a bad person? I don't care. Galen had inflicted too much pain on others who didn't deserve it. Death really wasn't enough to pay for that.

I walked past the Mage towards the large window at the end of the corridor—which was also covered by the same red wavering field as the doors, so no way out there—and leaned against the wall

looking out into the night. It was completely black, as all Eriadne's nights are, the planet having no moons of any significant size. Usually this made the stars stand out against the night sky like a field of diamonds but the red force field—or whatever it was—prevented me from seeing the stars. I turned my back to the wall and slid down until I was sitting on the floor under the window.

I could see Galen's shadow in the dim illumination given off by the red field, but he didn't move and he didn't speak.

Good. He had nothing to say that I wanted to hear.

It was a long night, cold and dark. I dozed as I sat on the floor with my back to the wall, but most of the time I watched the shadow where the Technomage stood, unmoving, during the long hours of darkness.

Eventually the gloom began to lift and the sky lightened. I knew the sun would soon rise and if what Galen had said was true, it wouldn't be long before I could escape. I climbed, a little stiffly, to my feet and moved towards the door of the room where Deborah had been trapped overnight. I'd spent most of the night worrying about her, and wondering who her visitor might be. I carefully ignored Galen as he turned to face me, but I couldn't ignore his voice.

"Matthew, I have one last message to give you."

I sighed and kept my back turned to him; when I felt the weight of his hand on my shoulder I shrugged it off. "Keep your message and your hands to yourself, Galen. Just leave."

I heard the sigh at my back. "I can't leave until I give you the message. You must know this, Matthew. There is a war coming. You must gather your strength and your weapons. And do not put your trust in anyone who has not earned it. That is my warning, Matthew. Now I can leave. I would have liked to take your forgiveness with me, but perhaps that was expecting too much."

His voice was fading as he went on, "We are all products of our upbringing, Matthew. I was taught to hate everything Vorlon from an early age and I was unable to unlearn that prejudice. That was my flaw, and I will always regret the actions I took because of it. I have learned the error of my ways. But beware that you don't fall into the same trap."

By the end, his voice was a mere whisper and when I turned, he'd gone.

Good riddance.

I couldn't see the sunrise from the west facing corridor but as the red light no longer glowed across the doorways I could only assume that the sun had risen and that I was now free. I flung myself at the door to the room where my wife had spent the night and threw it open.

Deborah Gideon

When the door closed behind Matthew, I immediately felt uncomfortable. Something wasn't right. I was sensing something that was unknown yet familiar. I knew I was alone in the room, but I could pick up feelings coming from somewhere outside my own body. My empathic senses are not as

strong as they once were and I can rarely sense anyone I can't see so I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to home in on what I was sensing. Sadness, apprehension, almost fear but also determination.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when a soft voice said, "Deborah. Please don't be afraid."

I leaped to my feet, grabbing the PPG from the side table and spinning around to aim it at the intruder who'd somehow got behind me. My finger quivered over the trigger, but I held off when I saw it was a woman who stood in the shadows near to the window. The sun had now set and the room was darkening, so I reached out with my free hand and flicked on the table lamp that stood nearby.



The extra light showed me a human female a little shorter and a little younger than me. She was very slender and wore a long, white dress that hung loosely from her shoulders and didn't flatter her at all. Her head was bowed so I couldn't see her face clearly, yet there was something familiar about her, and she certainly knew my name.

I kept the PPG pointing at her steadily and asked, "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

As she looked up at me, I saw her face clearly for the first time, and simultaneously, a wave of sadness swept through me. She spoke again quietly, asking, "Do you really not recognize me, Deborah? Surely you can't have forgotten me?"

I nearly spat out my words, "I've spent most of my life trying to forget you, so I can only say how disappointed I am that I've failed. But you're dead. You died on a planet far away, three hundred years ago. And I haven't mourned your passing once in all that time. I don't know what you are or why you're here, but leave. Leave now."

My voice was shaking with rage but my hand was steady as I pointed the PPG at her. The only thing that kept me from firing was the firm belief that shooting a ghost was pointless. And this woman could only be a ghost or an illusion of some kind. She could not possibly be my mother.

The mother who'd neglected me after my father left us. The mother who'd abandoned me to the care of strangers. The mother who hadn't cared enough about me to even visit me in the school she'd sent me away to. The mother I'd learned to hate and who I still hated. I may have lived for half a century in one time or another, but seeing this woman made me feel like a child again. A child who still wept because her parents had left her alone in the dark, without food or comfort, without warmth or kindness.

This woman could not possibly be here. I refused to accept her presence. But I kept the PPG trained on her and my trigger finger trembled from the effort of not allowing myself to shoot. I wanted to shoot her, to kill her. I wanted her to suffer as she'd caused me to suffer. I wanted her dead again.

The emotions spilled out of me and I saw the woman shudder; her face crumpled with the pain she was feeling as I projected. I was glad. I wanted her to feel my hurt and anger. I wanted her to know

what she'd done to me, not just intellectually but viscerally. I wanted her emotions raw and painful, burning every nerve ending with exquisite suffering.

Gods how I hated this woman. I shook with the fierceness of my hatred.

She covered her face with her hands and wailed, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. I know I treated you appallingly. I know I was the worst mother any child could have, but I couldn't help it. Please, please, try to understand. I was drowning in pain and loss. I didn't know how to drag myself out of the pit of despair I fell into after your father left us. I loved him so much. I missed him so much it was an effort to even breathe. Every day I just wanted to die. You know what it is to love a man like that. Please, try to understand."

Her knees gave way beneath her and she fell to the floor, her face still covered, her pain and her grief sweeping over me, great waves of loss that threatened to drown me in despair. I stepped backwards and the seat of a chair hit the back of my knees. I dropped into the chair and tried to clear my head, tried to push away the emotions emanating from the woman collapsed at my feet. But I couldn't. All I could feel was her sorrow and regret. I couldn't doubt that she'd meant every word she'd said. But it changed nothing. Her pain and her loss might explain why she'd abandoned me but it didn't excuse it.

Then I remembered how I'd felt when I thought I would lose Matthew on Centauri Prime. How my grief had awoken the Vorlon inside me. I remembered how I'd refused to leave Inesbitrin when everyone told me that my husband was dead, how I'd abandoned my son who'd missed me and needed me. And I knew I was a hypocrite. I was no different from my mother. I'd put my love for my husband before my love for my son. How was that different to this woman who sat sobbing on the floor in front of me? It was different because I'd made sure my son was being cared for while we were separated. I hadn't left him cold and hungry in the dark, as she had left me.

But I lowered the PPG and with a shaking hand laid it on the table next to the chair. It was only then I remembered that I was supposed to be on watch for any activity in the castle's inner court and I looked quickly at the window that still hovered in the middle of the room, but was now covered by a red and black wavering field. There was no motion beyond the field. Everything was still, except for the weeping woman in front of me.

I took a deep breath and said brusquely, "Pull yourself together, mother. You were never this hysterical when you were alive. Don't coddle yourself now you're dead."

Yes, I know I was being unsympathetic, but she deserved it. When had she ever showed me sympathy? When had she ever showed she understood my pain at losing my father? Back then she'd indulged her own grief and ignored mine, just as she did now. Nothing had changed.

Slowly, she brought herself under control. She drew a handkerchief from her sleeve and delicately blew her nose. That instantly took me back to my childhood. I remembered how she used to admonish me for blowing my nose noisily, insisting it wasn't ladylike. Well I hadn't been a lady then and I wasn't one now, so I would still blow my nose properly, not in delicate little sniffs.

It seemed everything about her irritated me. I just wanted her gone.

"What are you doing here, how did you get here and when will you leave?" I couldn't be bothered being polite.

She told me all about the Brakiri Day of the Dead. I'd heard of the festival, but didn't understand how it could be happening on Eriadne; it seemed my mother was unable to explain. I just had to accept that it was happening. My mother, Patricia Montgomery, was here in front of me, and I was stuck with her for the night.

I tried to leave the room and burned my fingers on the field enclosing the doorway. I knew Matthew was probably just the other side of that door, as he couldn't have gone far before the sun had set, but he might as well have been on Brakir. I longed to be with him, to have him hold me and tell me that this was all a bad dream. I missed him, as I always missed him, every moment when he wasn't by my side.

I tried linking with Angel but again I was blocked. I still don't know how that was possible. Since Angel had re-established our link after her wedding, she, Lily and I had been able to connect with each other from anywhere. But not that night. Somehow, that field blocked everything, physical and mental.

I was alone. Alone with a ghost I hated.

My mother explained that despite its appearance, the red field was actually as wide as the distance between Eriadne and Brakir, and was filled with the vacuum of space. It didn't make sense, but then having my mother's ghost sitting on the floor in front of me didn't make much sense either.

It seemed I was stuck with her until dawn so I had a choice. I could either sit in silence, hating her and wishing her dead again, or we could talk. I could listen as she tried to explain her behavior. I decided that listening to her drivel would at least be mildly more entertaining than silence, so I let her talk, while I sat with one eye on the view created by Angel's ball of sight, checking that there was no movement in the courtyard. All was still and silent outside if not inside.



Most of what my mother said washed over me unheard and unlamented. I really didn't care what she had to say. But as she talked about her own childhood, I began to listen. I realized that my mother's life as a child had been as bereft of affection as my own. More so, since she hadn't had five years of happiness, as I'd had before my father left.

My mother's father had deserted his wife and child before she was even born. She'd been brought up by a cold, undemonstrative, typically English upper-class family, with very stiff upper lips. She'd wanted for nothing in material terms, but received no love or emotional support of any kind. It was really not surprising that she'd had no idea how to show affection to her own child. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps she too had been a product of the Vorlon breeding program. A program designed to eventually produce a cold, emotionless woman to direct their weapon: the merge. The woman I would have become had I

not met my younger sister when I did. How long had the Vorlons been manipulating my family? How far back did their program go?

Gradually I saw that my mother was a victim, too. Just like me and my sisters, she'd been bred for a purpose then manipulated into a life that would produce another generation as controlled, cold and unloving as the last. That could have been me, would have been me, had my father not defied his Vorlon masters and written to me, telling me about my younger sister. If I hadn't found Angel after her mother died, if that meeting hadn't happened until we were brought together on Eriadne, I would never have learned to love, never have learned to feel sympathy for others. It was learning to live with Angel, then with my other sisters, that had broken me out of the frozen shell of control that the Vorlons would have condemned me to.

My hatred for my mother wasn't going to disappear in one night, but by the time dawn came, we had begun to understand each other better and at least I no longer wanted to kill her. Not that it mattered, as she was already dead.

As the pre-dawn light crept through the windows, she said to me, "I have to go soon. I won't ask for your forgiveness now. But perhaps one day you might not think so badly of me. I honestly could not help what I did."

I nodded, having at least some understanding of what she was saying. But she was right; it was too soon for me to forgive her.

She rose to her feet and her white dress seemed to fade as the light brightened. "Now I have one last thing I must tell you. There are challenges you must face in the future. You will have to be strong for your husband and your family. But I know you can achieve anything you set out to, Deborah. I am so proud of you. I love you."

And with that she was gone. I sat for a moment, trying to process what I'd just heard, everything I'd learned during that long night, then threw myself out of the chair and ran towards the door.

As I ran the door burst open and Matthew flung himself through. We collided in the middle of the room and held each other so tightly, we could hardly breathe. I never wanted him to let go of me again.

Jack Gideon

The first time Angelique and I left the dining room it was to take food trays up to Nisrina and Lowanna. They were staying in Demon's rooms until we could get them safely off Eriadne.

I've always liked Demon's rooms. White walls, floors, rugs, pillows, furniture and curtains gave the rooms a clean, fresh feel. It could have felt cold, particularly as the room faced north, looking down into the inner courtyard from the terrace, but somehow the cushions and rugs warmed the place. The bedroom and bathroom had no windows and would have been gloomy had they been decorated in any other color. I liked the uncluttered feel of the place, but don't tell my wife that.

Angelique knocked on the door while holding a tray balanced in mid-air with her telekinetic powers. I never get tired of seeing her do that. She called out and the door opened just a slit, but enough for us

to see Lowanna just peeping around the edge. Once she'd confirmed we were alone, she opened the door wide, but kept herself behind it. Inside, Nisrina was standing on the far side of the room, a PPG aimed at us as we entered.

I placed the food tray on the table and nodded my approval. "Good. Lowanna kept herself out of your line of fire, and you were well positioned to stop an intruder. But next time, maybe take cover behind the couch, and set up your firing line from there. You'll be better protected."

Nisrina lowered the gun and nodded. We quickly briefed them on the defenses that had been set up around the castle and told them not to try to open the glass doors to the terrace, as they'd get a nasty shock from the force-field protecting the exit. Once we were sure they had everything they needed, we left and quickly made our way down one flight to Angelique's rooms.

They were on the opposite side of the same wing from Demon's rooms, facing south, looking outside the castle over the fields. Once inside, Angelique found her balls of sight and swiftly set the first one up inside her 'spell room' as she called it. I asked her how the balls worked and she frowned, trying to think of how to explain.

"I think I sort of fold space. It's like Einstein's rubber sheet universe. I can take two parts of the rubber and sort of fold them together, so I can see through from one to the other and if I want, I can reach through with my mind and move things in the other place. It's a bit difficult to explain, but the main thing is that it works."

I then asked why she was setting up her own viewing position in her spell room. Why not be more comfortable in the bedroom? She shook her head. "Setting up three of these at once is hard. I have to make three separate folds and keep two of them folded when I'm not there to hold them in place. To do that, I need as few distractions as possible. In here," she waved at the empty room, "I can focus. Once I've got them all set up, I can relax a bit."

"OK, I can't say I understand, but I'll go with whatever you say you need." I pulled her to me and gave her a quick kiss, then she scooped up the other two balls and we left her rooms at a run. We wanted to get everything done, get something to eat and get back to her rooms before sunset to start our watch. We needed to move quickly.

It was a fairly long walk across the castle to the west wing to get to the wedding suite where Angelique and I had spent our first night together after our wedding. I smiled as we entered the living room, remembering how I'd waited there with Baby while Angelique had got dressed up in her ridiculously sexy bunny outfit. We'd had fun that night and on many nights since, and I gave mental thanks to Demon for helping us resolve our recent differences.

Angelique set up the second ball so a view of the inner court hung in the middle of the room. Then she turned and asked, "Why did Demon want me to set up this view here, and get us to look out onto the main entrance hall?"

"Pretty sound tactics on Demon's part. I suspect that she's learned them from working with Matt, even if I say so through gritted teeth. She's putting the strongest line of defense closest to the targets. Harry and Hjalmar are the weakest point—although no one could describe either of those two as weak, especially as they're both armed to the teeth—so they're the first line of defense at the gate.

Matt and Demon are the next strongest, so she has them in the middle. You're the strongest, so if anything gets past the first two, you'll be waiting for it. And I'll be right alongside you, shooting to kill."

It grieved me to compliment the strategy, but Demon had done exactly what I would have done. I guess if she'd learned tactics from Matt, that wasn't too surprising, as we're basically the same person. And I said that through gritted teeth, too. Also, since I'm a very modest soul, I hate complimenting myself for doing my usual thorough job.

Why are you looking at me like that?

We'd left the wedding suite and descended the stairs while I'd been talking, and arrived at the dining room to see Matt and Demon still sitting there. Matt looked a little pale and I just caught a quick glimpse of Demon putting something under her skirt. A flash of my sister-in-law's long legs is always welcome, but it was the very large knife she'd been holding and then somehow made disappear that really attracted my attention. If she'd been waving that at Matt it was no wonder he looked pale.

Angelique and I ate rapidly then loaded up more trays of food for Harry and Hjalmar. We took more than double what we'd taken up to Nisrina and Lowanna, figuring that they were two big boys who'd need a lot of feeding. The way they fell on the food as soon as we arrived confirmed our suspicions about their appetites. The ball of sight was soon set up with a view of the road leading up to the main gate of the castle, much to Hjalmar's astonishment. Harry just shrugged and accepted it. I think he believed that Angelique could do anything and nothing surprised him anymore.

We left and quickly moved back through the inner court and into the main entrance hall, shutting and locking the doors firmly behind us. Running back through the hall, I could see Matt and Demon had already left the dining room, presumably making their way to their rooms for the night, so we raced up the stairs after them.

You may have been wondering why I hadn't chipped in on any of Matt's plans and had gone along with everything he'd ordered. Well, Matt and I had had a little talk before he boarded Serenity. I'd told him I didn't care what his job was, on board my ship I was Captain and he'd follow orders. Matt had seen the sense of not challenging a line of command, but he'd demanded a concession in exchange. If I was in command on board Serenity, then when we left the ship, he was the boss. He'd much more experience of Eriadne than I had, so I'd agreed. Planet-side, Matt was in charge and unless I saw a major flaw in what he wanted, I kept my mouth shut and got on with it. Neither of us enjoyed taking orders from the other—neither of us was good at taking orders full stop—but we knew when to do what we were told.

So I followed orders and took my wife off to our rooms to set up watch for the night. The sun was just dipping towards the horizon as we got there, and Angelique went through to her spell room. I paused long enough to grab some cushions and throws, intending to make us more comfortable in there during the long watch ahead. But as I paused, the door to the spell room swung shut. I juggled pillows until I could free a hand to turn the doorknob and immediately got a nasty shock. It felt like someone had wired the knob to the mains electric.

Cursing, I dropped the cushions, covered my hand with one of the throws and went to try again. A voice behind me said, "'That's not a good idea, Matthew. It will hurt.'

I froze. I knew that voice. It was unmistakable. Deep, sonorous and with a strong English accent. Pompous, too. There was just one problem. The person who spoke with that voice was dead. He died just after my wedding to Angelique. In fact, it was my wife who'd killed him. After he'd come damned close to killing me. I lost a leg the day he lost his life. I'd grown my leg back with the help of some seriously weird drugs, so had Galen somehow grown his life back? That would take some very weird drugs indeed.



I turned around and saw a shadow, deeper than the rest, standing by the door. I reached out and turned on a lamp, allowing me to see more clearly. It was definitely Galen, the hood of his long leather coat up around his head, his staff grasped in his hand.

"I thought you were dead. I thought my wife killed you."

Galen smiled, an unexpected response. "Like Mark Twain, I could say that reports of my death are greatly exaggerated, but that would be untrue. Alas, Matthew, I am truly dead but it wasn't your wife who killed me. I died on Centauri Prime, trying to save my friends."

I turned and moved to the sofa, sitting and staring up at the dead Technomage. I didn't understand this at all. I was talking to a dead man, a ghost if you like, but not the ghost of the Mage I'd seen die eight years before. No, this ghost was claiming to be from my previous reality, which had split away from the universe I lived in now when the Excalibur had failed to arrive at Eriadne at before the people and structures had been destroyed. And as a result I'd failed to find the cure for the Drakh plague, and ten billion humans had died because of my failure.

The Technomage from this universe, now standing in the shadows, had committed enough crimes. He'd attacked and nearly killed a defenseless pregnant woman. But in my reality I suspected his crimes were far worse.

I fought to contain my rage and was proud when my voice didn't waver as I said, "My name isn't Matthew any more. In this place I'm Jack. You'd better learn to call me that."

Galen nodded. "Of course. Jack then. I've come to see you, Jack. For one night I can break through the barrier that separates the dead from the living, as well as the barrier between alternate universes and I have come to bring you a message. A warning if you like." He explained about the Brakiri Day of the Dead and the comet. I hardly listened, as the rage inside me continued to build.

I sat back in the sofa and looked up at him, my voice dripping with contempt as I said, "Do you really think I'll listen to anything you have to say, Galen? Do you think I would trust you again

after what you did? Here, in this place, in our reality. This is where it happened, isn't it? This is where you destroyed any possibility of us finding the cure, and condemned ten billion people to death."

I jumped to my feet and charged, grasping Galen by the throat and slamming him into the wall. "You took away everything good in our universe. You killed everything that mattered. And you have the nerve to walk in here, or whatever it is that ghosts do, and expect me to sit and listen to you? Go to hell, Galen. That's where you belong."

He didn't move, didn't struggle as I squeezed tighter and tighter, wanting to kill him, needing to kill him for ending my world, for making me live in guilt and fear until I wanted nothing more than to die. I remembered how I'd felt in those last few weeks before the enemy caught up with Excalibur and defeated her. I remembered sitting in my command chair ordering the evacuation of my ship and preparing to die. Death was all I'd had left.

And this man was responsible for it all.

But you can't kill a ghost. As tangible as his neck felt beneath my hand, squeezing it didn't stop his breath, because he didn't breathe. He didn't die because he didn't live.

Eventually I realized the futility of my actions and pulled my hand away. I turned my back and walked away, saying, "Get out of here. Fuck off, Galen. Just leave."

The voice that spoke softly behind me wasn't affected by the damage I'd tried to inflict. "I can't leave until dawn. Those are the rules that I cannot break." There was a long pause and then he said, "How did you know? When did you find out?"

I flung myself back down on the sofa and said, "It wasn't exactly hard to figure out. Once I arrived in this reality, we soon compared notes and worked out when our universes split. The Matthew Gideon in this universe came to Eriadne, where Max Eilersen found some writings in the ruins that started the process of developing a cure. I didn't get to Eriadne in time because you stopped me. And when we eventually made our way here, you'd got here before us, hadn't you? You'd destroyed it all: the castle, the colony, the ruins, everything. You killed all those people to prevent us finding the cure."

I felt sick with anger and grief. I'd trusted this man, who I'd thought of as a friend and the consequences had been devastating for billions.

Galen slowly shook his head, moving his hood back and looking down at me. "They weren't killed to prevent you finding the cure, Matthew...Jack. They were killed because they carried the taint of the Vorlons. And they were not killed by me. I didn't know about the castle, the ruins or the sisters. I didn't destroy this place. It was the Technomage council who ordered the destruction, and their allies who carried it out. I only carried the message that the F band emissions had been detected. The emissions that are the unique signature of Vorlon technology."

I laughed, but it wasn't funny, it was tragic. "So I shouldn't shoot the messenger, is that what you're saying, Galen? It's not your fault. And just who were those allies that destroyed this place? Who rained destruction from the skies until there was nothing left but melted glass? No castle, no colony, no ruins, nothing for us to find and work from. Who did it, Galen? Who?"

I was on my feet and almost spitting in his face by then. He raised his staff, almost threatening me but I just pushed it aside. I was too angry to be afraid. Was a dead Technomage something to be feared? I didn't know and didn't care.

Galen stepped back in the face of my fury and said softly, "My people were created by the Shadows. Our allies were also their creations. You encountered one of them earlier in your life. You saw one of them on the day I first saved you from death."

If I'd been angry before I was now almost incandescent with rage. "A Shadow hybrid? One of those things destroyed this place in my universe? They were your allies? For fuck's sake, Galen, I hope your death was slow and painful. I hope you and the whole of your order died in agony, thinking of every death you'd caused. You deserve eternal torment for what you did."

My friends and colleagues on the Cerberus had all been killed by Galen's allies. Is that why he'd saved me? Guilt at what his friends had done? It hardly mattered now.



Galen's voice almost broke as he replied, "You have your wish as far as I'm concerned, Matthew...Jack. I died in agony on Centauri Prime and I died slowly. Thirteen Dark Mages awaited me there, a full coven. They stripped me of my staff and they flayed me, removing all my implants, an agonizing process that rendered me helpless. Then they handed me over to the Centauri, who first made me watch John Matheson and Dureena die. Afterwards, they manacled me to a metal sheet and lit a fire under it. A small fire, which burned slowly. The metal heated gradually but inexorably until I burned. It took days for me to die. Does that make you happy? Does that heal the damage I caused? Does that make it better for you?"

I looked at him and nodded. "Yes. In some small way it does. At least you were punished. You suffered for what you did. So yes, knowing that helps. But I still want you and every other Technomage from my reality to burn in hell for all eternity for what you did in my universe. I'll say it again, Galen. Go to hell."

The silence that followed was unbroken for the rest of the night. I sat and stared out of the window into the darkness and Galen stood motionless and silent by the door. There was nothing left to say. Every so often I tried my commlink to see if I could make contact with anyone, but all I got back was static. Not surprising if, as Galen had said, the room was the effective distance of Brakir away from Eriadne.

Just to vary the monotony, I worried about what was happening behind the door to Angelique's spell room, and whether she had a visitor, too. So every hour or so, I got up and tried the door and window handles and got the same shock from the red and black field every time. I remember hearing that Einstein once said that doing something over and over again and expecting a different result is one definition of madness. Well, I came close to insanity that night.

Only as the sky began to brighten with pre-dawn sunlight did Galen finally speak. "I must deliver my warning, Matthew...Jack. I cannot leave until I do. There is a war coming. You must gather your strength and your weapons. And do not put your trust in anyone who has not earned it. That is my warning, Matthew. Now I can leave. I would have liked to take your forgiveness with me, but perhaps that was expecting too much."

His voice was fading as he went on, "We are all products of our upbringing, Matthew. I was taught to hate everything Vorlon from an early age and I was unable to unlearn that prejudice. That was my flaw, and I will always regret the actions I took because of it. I have learned the error of my ways. But beware that you don't fall into the same trap."

By the end, his voice was a mere whisper and when I turned, he'd gone.

Good riddance.

The red light that had framed the windows and doors disappeared as the sun rose. I ran to the door of Angelique's spell room and flung it open, rushing inside and taking my wife into my arms. I held her as tightly as I could without hurting her and promised her over and over again that I would never let her go. I would always be with her, for the rest of our lives and beyond.

Angelique Denier-Gideon

The door swung closed behind me as I entered my spell room to check on the view from my ball of sight. I turned to go back and open it for Jack, knowing that he'd have his hands full of pillows and throws but as I reached for the handle, a red flicker of light covered the door and when I touched it, it burned. I snatched my hand back, sucking my fingers to soothe the pain. Frowning at the door-handle, I tried to use my telekinesis to turn it.

Nothing. The handle wouldn't shift. So I tried again, this time using my power on the whole door, trying to drag it open by force. Again, nothing happened. No matter how hard I tried the door would not open. Turning to the high window that allowed some light to filter into the room, I again reached out with my mind and tried to open it. It wouldn't budge, and that same red and black force field blocked most of the light. I snapped my fingers and whispered the 'spell' I needed to light the candles that were scattered around the room, and they lit immediately. So my powers weren't blocked; something else was happening.

I tried to link with my sister to call for help. Maybe she and Matt could find a way to get me out. But that didn't work either. I couldn't make contact with her or Lily and that didn't make sense. On my last visit to Eriadne I'd made a change to our minds which allowed us to link with each other from anywhere. But not here it seemed. Not here and now.

I turned to the aperture I'd set up with my ball of sight. I could see the main entrance hall of the castle, which was deserted. But every doorway was outlined in the same red and black field that I could see in my own room. I tried to move the view from the ball, but I couldn't shift it. That had never happened before either. I could always change what I saw through the ball. But not here and now.

So I tried to teleport out of there, focusing on my bedroom, visualizing my destination but again nothing happened. I couldn't teleport out of that damned room!

I started to panic. I was trapped in a room with no way out and Jack was trapped on the other side of the door and I didn't know what was happening to him or to anyone else in the castle and I couldn't contact them and what if the townspeople attacked the castle and I couldn't help because I was trapped in this room trapped alone where I couldn't get enough air and I couldn't breathe and the room started to spin and...

"Calm down, chérie. It's OK. Breathe. You're safe with me. Everything is OK."

I froze. The voice coming from behind me was very familiar and only one person had ever called me chérie. I turned slowly, looking at the person who stood there and whispered, "Mama?"

Then everything went black.

When I came to, she was bending over me, smiling. I remembered her face so well and she looked just as I'd seen her last except she looked healthy, not sick as she'd been then. I couldn't understand how or why she could be there, but she was. My mother was kneeling at my side, leaning over me, gently stroking my face and calling to me in that soft Cajun voice of hers.



"Come on, ma chère. It's OK. You're safe. I'm here now, and nothing bad is going to happen. I can only spend one night with you, ma petite. So please don't sleep it away. I know how you love to sleep."

She laughed gently, and it brought back so many happy memories from my childhood. Memories of when I didn't want to get up for school, and she'd chided me about how I loved to stay in bed, warm and comfortable, when there was a big, wide world outside waiting to be explored.

"Mama. Is it really you? How can you be here?" I reached out to touch her and she was real. Her body was solid and warm, her hair was silky. The woolen scarf she wore around her neck was soft, just as I remembered it when she'd worn that same scarf before she died.

My mother helped me sit up then moved us both until we were sitting back against the wall opposite the 'window' I'd created earlier. I could see the main hallway and it was still empty. No movement at all.

I listened as my mother explained about the Brakiri Day of the Dead and how it all worked, but I didn't really take it in. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was here, now and I could feel her, touch her, smell her perfume and feel her arms around me. Nothing else mattered. If this could only last for one night, I would make the most of it and worry about tomorrow when it came. There was only one thing that prevented me from just enjoying the moment.

"Jack. Is he safe, Mama? Is he OK?"

My mother looked at me and smiled again. "He's just the other side of that door and he's quite safe. He has his own caller as have the other members of your family. They will tell you all about their visitors tomorrow. But tonight I have to tell you so much, so many things I didn't explain when you were growing up. I thought we had time, I thought I could explain everything when you were older, but our time ran out and I never got chance. So tonight I must make up for what I didn't do when I was alive. You should know who you are and who I was."

That night I learned so much. Mama told me how she'd been born Adrienne Denier, and raised in an orphanage in Louisiana. Thrown out when she turned sixteen, she'd hitchhiked to Baton Rouge and found a job at a diner, living in a tiny room nearby. She'd worked there for nearly two years before she was taken.

"I don't remember much about that time, Angelique. It was dark and it hurt. They put things in me; made me part of some machine and all I could do was scream. I screamed and screamed but somehow at the same time I flew amongst the stars. I followed the commands that flooded my brain until everything went black again."

My mother explained how she'd awoken in a mental asylum, still screaming, and found that over a year of her life was gone. Her recovery was slow, not helped by the drugs she was being given. They stopped the drugs when they found out she was pregnant.

"Pregnant? But how? Who?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'd never been with a man. But when I'd been part of the machine, they'd put things inside me, so maybe then..." Her voice ran out and I saw her tears and her pain at what had been done to her.

I held my mother tightly and rocked her, comforted her. For a moment, our roles were reversed; I was the mother and she was the child. A child who'd been abused in a way I'd seen before. The memories of the woman trapped inside the hybrid ship over Nabula flooded back. The same things had happened to my mother. How had she survived all that to become the wonderful mother I'd known?

"Was that me? Is that where I came from?" In a way it made sense. I knew that my powers came from the Shadows. Is that how I was conceived and born? But it also felt wrong. If that child was me, then I couldn't be Demon's half-sister. I was confused.

But my mother shook her head. "No, ma chère. Not you. You came later. This was my first child. A child of darkness. When she was born, I named her Lailah, which means dark night. She was a beautiful baby but I couldn't love her; I wasn't allowed."

She explained that once her pregnancy had been discovered, she'd been moved to a place where unmarried mothers were taken to have their babies in secret. The same place where she'd been born and grown up. Where her own mother had abandoned her.

"They said I must stay and work to pay for my medical costs and for my baby's upbringing. They only allowed me to see her for half an hour each day. I couldn't stay there, so like my mother before me, I ran away. I left my daughter behind to be raised by strangers, just as I had been." Tears fell

from her eyes as she told that part of her story, and I didn't have to be an empath like my sister to feel her pain and guilt.

I thought back to what Alwyn had told me years before. How I was the result of a Shadow breeding experiment where every generation had been abducted then returned to Earth. How each woman had given birth to a female child, who had later been kidnapped, just like her mother. I wondered who the fathers of these daughters had been. Had all those women been impregnated as my mother had?

I shuddered at the evil that had been done to them and at the realization that if I'd been my mother's first daughter, I would have been taken by the Shadows and subjected to the same torture. It was only because the Vorlons had intervened and hi-jacked the Shadows' breeding program, resulting in my birth, that I'd been spared that fate. I'd been kidnapped by the Vorlons instead and tortured by them until my powers had manifested, but at least I hadn't been alone in my ordeal. I'd had my sisters to give me strength. My older half-sister, Lailah, would have gone through her torment alone, just like our mother.

But the news that I'd had another half-sister was shocking. I wondered what had happened to her back then in the 20th century. Had she been abducted in her turn? Had she given birth to another daughter? And had that pattern continued until the Shadows had left the galaxy? Somewhere out in the galaxy, did I have a great niece to the power of ten or so? I put aside these speculations and listened as my mother continued her story.

She told me how she'd ran away from the orphanage, constantly moving, changing her name, getting work where she could, stealing when she couldn't, doing what she needed to survive.

"Eventually, I arrived at a small town in Wyoming where they needed extra staff at the local diner. A dam and a reservoir were being built nearby and the men working on it came into town for breakfast and dinner. The local businesses had all started opening longer hours to service the workers, so they needed more people. The owners gave me a small room over the diner and although they paid minimum wage, the hours were long and the tips were good, so it seemed like a good place to stay. I'd only been there a few days when your father walked through the door. I think I fell in love with him before he'd finished his meal."

She laughed as she told me that he was gorgeous, looking just like a movie star from that era, with blonde hair and blue eyes, tall and slim with broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs. He was an engineer working at the dam and after that first meal he came back every morning and night to eat at the diner. He took her to the movies on her first night off, then to a creek for a picnic the next day she was free.

"It was a beautiful autumn day, with the sun shining and the wind playing with the golden leaves on the trees. We made love on a blanket by the creek. Oh, Angelique, I'd never known anything like it! He was gentle and kind and he gave me such pleasure I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. He was like an angel come down to Earth, and he had a name to match. He told me he was called Rafe, short for Rafael. Rafael Montgomery. Within another week I'd moved into his house and we lived as man and wife."

Mama said Rafe was honest about being unable to marry her as he'd left a wife and child behind in England, and it would take a while for a divorce to come through. "But I didn't care, chérie. I was

in love. We made love every night and as the days shortened into winter, we snuggled together in our bed in that cabin and hid from the world. Every morning we'd leave each other to go to work, then rush back as soon as we could. Christmas Day we spent the whole day in bed, just making love and touching each other."

She looked at me closely, her eyes glowing with remembered passion. "I'm sure that was the day you were conceived, Angelique. You were made from our love and our passion for each other. You were made from the best of us."

This was so different to what I'd expected. I'd thought I was just the result of a breeding experiment, a loveless encounter, but now my mother was telling me that my father had truly loved her. But had she just been deceived by her own desires? I knew all too well how that could happen. I only had to think about Lucas Buck to know how far love could blind a woman to a man's true nature.

I must have looked doubtful as Mama smiled gently at me, lifting her hand to stroke my cheek. "No, mon ange, I wasn't a fool for love. He really did love me. He looked after me and cherished me as I grew, as you grew inside me, and I would catch him looking at me with awe and wonder in his eyes."

My mother continued to work through her pregnancy until she only had a few weeks before I was due. Her face became sad as she told the next part of her story.



"I came home from work one day and he was gone. He left a note saying he was sorry; he had no choice but to leave. There was enough money to cover the medical bills and to pay the rent on the cabin for a few months as well as feeding the two of us. I never saw or heard from him again. When you were born, I named you Angelique in memory of the angel I had lost."

Tears streamed down my mother's face as she remembered her lost love and again I held her and rocked her, remembering Michael, the love with an angelic name

who I too had lost. We comforted each other through that night.

The rest of her tale was soon told. She moved from place to place with me, always worried that the things that had abducted her might come back to take me, too. There had been times when my mother had been unwell, her experiences of being trapped in the Shadow ship overwhelming her. I'd never known the reason for those times when she'd withdrawn into herself, rocking and moaning with pain, but all was now explained. Despite her traumas, she'd loved me and made us a home wherever we stayed, doing her best to make it a place of love and laughter, until she became physically sick. I didn't want to talk about that time, about how she'd faded in front of me, the sickness eventually taking her from me.

We sat in silence through the rest of the night, taking comfort from each other, loving each other, but knowing our time together would soon be over, and grieving for each other and for everything we'd lost.

Eventually she spoke again. "It's nearly dawn outside, chérie. I have to go. But before I do, I need to tell you how sorry I am. I'm sorry I left you alone when you were so young, sorry I didn't get chance to watch you grow up into the beautiful woman I knew you would become. Sorry you've had so many struggles in your life. Can you forgive me? I'm so sorry..."

I pressed my fingers to her lips to stop her. "You have nothing to apologize for, Mama. It wasn't your fault you got sick. You loved me for as long as you could." She went to speak again, so I shushed her. "There's nothing to forgive, but if it's so important to you, then of course I forgive you. How could I not?"

My mother's eyes filled with tears again, and she leaned towards me and hugged me one last time. Then she pushed herself to her feet and held out her hand to me. I took it and rose to stand in front of her, gazing at her for what I knew would be the last time. She smiled sadly and said, "I have one last thing I must say to you, ma chère. Someday soon you will have to face your worst fears. You will have to make a choice. It will not be easy, but I know you are strong enough to choose wisely. I am so proud of you, ma minette. I love you."

And she was gone.

The door to my spell room was flung open and Jack rushed in, sweeping me into his arms and hugging me so hard I could barely breathe. He told me again and again how much he loved me and how he would never ever leave me. And I knew it was true. He was my happy ever after and I was lucky to have him. My mother had lost the love of her life, but I had found mine.

{Chapter 6}

Homecoming

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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