

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

by *The Space Witches*



Baby

Chapter 3

18th September 2288

Deborah Gideon

I stood outside the door to my bedroom, hesitating for a moment. The sun was rising outside and in only a couple of hours I would need to be up again, getting on with the many tasks that I needed to complete before our departure for Eriadne. Was it really worth going to bed or should I just use the guest bathroom for a shower then dress in whatever I could find in the laundry?

Who was I kidding? Not myself that's for sure and probably not you, either. I opened the door as quietly as I could, stripped my clothes off and slid silently into bed, trying not to disturb my husband. I can't help it if he's a really light sleeper, can I?

So it was no great surprise when Matthew turned over and smiled at me, then pulled me close, just as I'd expected—well, hoped—he might. He kissed me gently on the forehead and asked, "How is she?"

He was asking about Angel of course, and I knew that meant Jack had told him what was going on.

"Hurt and angry. She didn't understand why Jack hadn't told her he didn't like the way she'd made herself at home sooner. She thought she'd been making him unhappy all the time they were married." I tucked my head into my husband's shoulder and held him tightly, wanting to feel his warmth and his love.

He kissed me again and said, "Not surprising. Jack really is an idiot."

I couldn't help but laugh, "Takes one to know one. You were the same person for over forty years after all."

That inevitably led to a bit of tussling, but we managed to stop ourselves before we got too worked up. We do occasionally show some restraint, you know. And not just that sort of restraint, so don't look at me like that. Who doesn't enjoy a little light bondage at times?

Matthew laughed softly and said, "Go on. What did you say to her?"

I shook my head. "That's a sister thing. Husbands should keep their noses out."

The next thing I knew I'd been rolled onto my back and Matthew was lying on top of me. He looked down at me, his eyes full of love and lust. "Just noses?"

I smiled up at him lasciviously. "You're welcome to stick any other part of your anatomy pretty much anywhere you like."

So he did.

And we enjoyed a little more restraint later which involved some scarves and a little whip that Matthew had given me for Christmas many years before. I'm not saying who ate their breakfast standing up later that morning.

But if you bet on me, you would have lost.

Breakfast was a little later than I'd intended, but fortunately we were still down before Jack and Angel, and it didn't take long before we'd all eaten and set out our plans for the day. Matthew left for his office, while I called for one of the small shuttle carts that carried bulky items around the compound. I needed this to pickup Oscar's bed, blankets, toys, food, treats and all the other things it was imperative he should take with him for his stay with Marcus, Susan and Talia. I swear it takes longer to pack for the dog than it does for us!

Once that had all gone off, Oscar, Jack, Angel and I set out for a stroll down to the Ranger spaceport where Serenity was in temporary residence. I was interested to see the ship for the first time, as this was going to be my home for the next few days. Angel explained again that the water recycling system wasn't working properly.

"I'm really sorry, but we can't use water for showers or baths at the moment. We designed Serenity with super-sized water tanks, but we're still getting too much wastage to allow for anything other than drinking and cooking."

While I wasn't keen on vibe showers, I knew I could put up with them for a few days. Matthew, however, was another matter. He hated vibing with a vengeance. "Maybe it's best if Matthew just thinks that Serenity is like other ships of her size and vibe showers are standard. That way he won't complain about your recycling problems all the way to Eriadne."

Don't look at me like that. Sometimes a little white lie for the sake of family harmony is permissible. But only when I do it.

Jack gave an evil grin, while Angel laughed and I was delighted to hear the sound. There had been little laughter in her life for a while, and I couldn't help but feel proud and happy that I'd helped her through the worst of her sadness. Not alone, of course. Without Lily's help through our link, I might not have been able to persuade her that Jack still adored her. But Lily's fierce common sense and her passion for life had flowed through our connection and helped give Angel her confidence back.

I was just glad that Angel and I would be spending time together over the new few weeks so I could make sure she stayed happy and I could also bang Jack's head against a bulkhead—just gently—if he showed signs of repeating his stupidity.

I'd learned over the years that an occasional whack to a sensitive spot worked wonders in straightening out the Gideon thought processes. I was just surprised that Angel didn't sometimes use her telekinetic abilities for the same purpose. If Jack was anything like Matthew—and he was, of course—then every now and then thoughts and ideas took a little force to make their way into his brain. And a quick flick around the ear was better than a two by four, tempting though the latter might be at times.

We arrived at the spaceport and after putting Oscar on his leash we made our way to the bay Serenity occupied. I looked up at her looming above us and realized that she was larger than I'd expected.

A bit smaller than a White Star and without the painful taint of Vorlons that all White Stars seemed to carry, which made me so uncomfortable. My dislike of White Stars and the associated Vorlon tech was part of the reason I'd suggested us travelling with Jack and Angel, although no one else needs to know that, OK? We'll just keep that between us.



*I could see that, vibe showers aside, Matthew and I would probably be very comfortable on Serenity during our forthcoming trip. And yes, before you ask, I *had* already checked that our room would be fully shielded. There would be no issues with getting Baby or the crew over-excited if Matthew and I indulged in our favorite form of entertainment.*

Jack, Angel, Oscar and I walked up the ramp into the hold area where Harry was waiting with Baby, securely harnessed and leashed. Baby's beagle nose could lead him into unsafe areas if he was not carefully secured when they were in port.

Jack left us to go upto the bridge, while I gave Harry a hug and a kiss on the cheek, which made the big man blush beetroot red. He gave me a shy grin, thrust Baby's leash into Angel's hand then almost ran out of the cargo hold through one of the doors at the rear. Angel laughed and said softly, "You really shouldn't do that, Demon. He has a terrible crush on you and it frightens him to death that Matthew will find out and take a dreadful revenge on him"

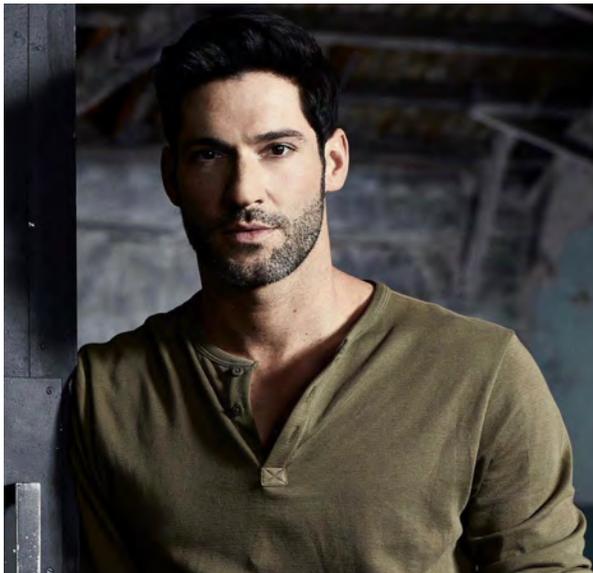
I couldn't help but laugh back. I'd never probed Harry's emotions and hadn't realized he had feelings for me. "Oh dear! I'll be more standoffish in future. I don't want to upset him. He's such a sweet man."

I heard a soft sigh from behind me and turned to see a classically tall, dark and handsome man standing there, grinning at me. I'd been so distracted by Harry's departure that I hadn't heard or felt him approach. The man's eyes were twinkling as he said, "I don't suppose you'd consider hugging and kissing me instead of Harry, would you?" The man had a subtle French accent, which I recognized as Quebecois. Well, I recognized it because Angel had already told me that her navigator was French Canadian.

The accent was very sexy, which fitted the whole package perfectly. This man was gorgeous! Just my type, about 10 centimeters taller than me, which put him around 190cm, slim but well-muscled, with dark hair and eyes, a very sexy mouth and long, elegant fingers. I could just imagine that mouth and those fingers doing things to me that threatened to raise my temperature and make me blush!

I pulled myself sternly under control, but before I could answer his impertinence, Angel said, "Frank, stop flirting!" She turned to me and smiled. "Demon, this is François Clayton—Frank to his friends—Navigator extraordinaire, Comms specialist and all around flirt. Don't worry, he's all talk. His wife, Ana Clara, makes sure of that."

Frank laughed and bowed deeply before catching my hand to kiss it. Fortunately, it was the hand that wasn't holding Oscar's leash. The touch of his mouth on my skin sent shivers down my spine but I was careful not to allow him to see or feel the effect he was having on me. He winked as he looked up and said, "But while the wife is away..."



I could feel his emotions and while he certainly admired me, I could also sense that his flirtation wasn't serious. There was no real lust in his feelings, just playfulness.

Dammit.

So I held back on the full Ice Queen mode that I normally turned on men who become impudent and said, "I'll look forward to meeting her when she gets back then. I believe she's Jack's Exec as well as pilot and engineer? How do you feel about having your wife over you, Frank? In rank, that

is?" I fluttered my eyelashes just to show Angel I knew how it was done.

She was looking at me somewhat askance as Frank laughed and replied, "I always like a woman to be in a commanding position."

Angel said abruptly, "Enough! We have places to go and things to do, Demon, so stop flirting and let's get on with it."

Frank bowed and kissed my hand again—he hadn't let go all the time we'd been talking, which hadn't helped my internal thermostat—saying, "Au revoir, ma petite Démon."

Now that made me laugh out loud. If there's one thing I'm not, it's petite!

I reminded myself that I was happily married and that my husband kept me completely satisfied, but I couldn't help giving my hips a little extra sway as my sister and I walked down the ramp and away from Serenity. Just in case Frank was enjoying the rear view.

It looked like we could have a very interesting voyage ahead of us.

Angel and I walked back through the spaceport with our dogs on their leashes, until we exited through the gates into the Ranger compound. There, I immediately let Oscar run free, while Angel kept Baby tethered by a long lead. We'd learned during previous visits that the little beagle could often let his nose overwhelm his other senses, and once he was following a scent he became deaf to all commands.

So we walked through the beautiful gardens in silence, enjoying the sunshine even though the weather was cold. It was one of the crisp, clear days we often enjoyed during the Minbari autumn. After a few moments walking, I pointed to a nearby bench which was sheltered from the worst of the cool wind while enjoying full sun, and said to Angel, "Do you want to sit for a while?"

She smiled and reeled Baby in until she could watch him snuffling through the nearby shrubbery. Oscar had wandered off but I knew he would stay within earshot and come when called. As we sat, Angel tilted her head back, closed her eyes and presented her face to the sun, smiling. After a few moments she sighed and opened her eyes, then turned to me and said, "It's nice to feel the sun on my face and the wind in my hair. It's the only real downside of living on a ship. No weather."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You wouldn't say that if you got caught outside in a sudden downpour when you're out walking the dog! The inside of a nice cozy ship has a definite appeal at times like that."

Angel chuckled and closed her eyes again, sighing with satisfaction at the feel of the sun on her face, even if it didn't hold much warmth at that time of year. After a few moments more of silence, I asked softly, "So how did it go? You and Jack seemed OK this morning."

Angel turned to face me, opening her eyes and smiling. "You were right. As always. I really should remember that, shouldn't I? Demon is always right."

I laughed but said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"Jack apologized. Profusely, repeatedly and abjectly. He did it so fervently that I really had no choice but to forgive him." She smiled for a moment, but then her face fell into more somber lines. "But I still don't understand how he couldn't know how hurtful his comments were. How could he misjudge so badly? I thought we knew everything there was to know about each other. How could he have got it so wrong?" Angel's face showed how hurt and confused she still was.

I took my sister's hand and squeezed it gently, giving a soft sigh as I said, "Matthew and I will have been married for nineteen years next month and he still says and does stupid, thoughtless things at times. And so do I. We're human, Angel, we make mistakes. No matter how long you and Jack are married, you will both still make mistakes. There's no cure for that. But you don't have to let it damage your relationship. If Jack says or does something that hurts, you have to tell him. Tell him what he's done and how it makes you feel. If he doesn't know what he's done, he can't stop himself from doing it again. He'll just keep on making the same mistake over and over again."

I sighed again, remembering times when I hadn't practiced what I was now preaching and both Matthew and I had been hurt as a result. "Talk to him, Angel. Only by being open and honest will you be able to move beyond the small hurts that arise in every relationship. And the big ones, too," I interjected before Angel could claim that I was trivializing what had happened.

Angel frowned and looked down at the leash she was still holding. "But I don't want to be constantly complaining. I don't want to be a whingy, whiney wife."

I laughed again and gave her a nudge with my elbow. "Constantly? Is Jack really so stupid that he's constantly hurting you? Come on, Angel, I know my husband, so I know yours pretty well, too. He's not a complete idiot." I couldn't help but grin as I went on, "He and Matthew are much more like Oscar than Baby. They're quite trainable with the right reward system."

Angel looked up at me sharply and then started to giggle, "And we know how to reward them, don't we?"

I grinned and said, "I remember a dog trainer telling me to ignore the behavior you don't like and reward what you do like. Our husbands are a little smarter than the average dog, so if you tell them, gently but firmly, to stop doing something, they usually take instruction quite well."

Angel's giggles got worse as she said, "You do realize that the next time I see Jack, I'll be tempted to tell him to SIT in a very firm voice."

I couldn't help myself. I had to reply, "Well, once he's mastered that, you can move onto a more advanced command."

Angel sobered enough to ask, "What's that then?"

I gave her an evil grin.

"Beg."

It was quite some time before we controlled ourselves enough to continue our walk to the house where Marcus Cole, Susan and Talia live. And every time we caught sight of Oscar's tail peeping out of the shrubbery, or Baby's nose lifted from whatever scent he was following to look back at us, we started to laugh again.

We didn't stay with Marcus and Susan for long—Talia was absent, doing some commercial telepath business down in Tuzanor—but long enough for Angel and Marcus to have a happy reunion and for

Oscar to settle into what was virtually his second home. He always stayed there when Matthew and I travelled.

Baby was duly fussed over and Marcus told Susan again that they should get a dog of their own. Susan gave him her standard reply that having one hairy beast to take care of in the house was quite enough. This made Marcus grin with pleasure and kiss her hand. I loved seeing and feeling them together. Susan was such a different person to how she'd been when Marcus went missing for over five years.



Happiness changes a person profoundly. I only had to look at Jack and Angel to know that. They were good for each other despite the bumps in the road they encountered along the way. Heaven knows that Matthew and I had faced enough obstacles in our path over the years, and we'd probably have the odd rocky time ahead, too. But I was now confident that we could get past anything life threw at us, as long as we had each other and we talked.

Don't get me wrong. I don't believe that my husband has to know everything I think or feel. For example, I had no intention of telling him that I thought Frank Clayton was the sexiest man I had met in a very long time! There are some things Matthew doesn't need to know. But we do talk about the big things and it works. After nearly nineteen years of marriage we are happier and more contented with each other than ever. And Matthew still keeps me completely satisfied in bed. I could never imagine needing or wanting another lover.

But I digress. Thinking about my husband has that effect on me. Somehow I always end up thinking about sex. What can I say? We like sex. Actually, we love sex. It's excellent cardiovascular activity if it's done properly. And I always do it properly.

Bunnies on aphrodisiacs.

Where was I? Oh yes, Angel and I took Baby back to the house and I spent the rest of the day packing everything Matthew and I would need for our trip, while Angel napped with Baby in her room.

In the evening, Jack and Matthew got back in time for a late supper then Matthew and I had an early night, knowing that we'd be leaving early the next day. Not that we went to sleep immediately of course. And I'm not saying where my thoughts were straying as my husband worked his magic on me with his tongue, his fingers and finally, once I was begging, with the part of him I love the most.

Thinking about it, maybe he's got me trained to beg, too.

It wouldn't be the first time I've been called a bitch.

20th September 2288

We celebrated Matthew and Jack's birthday on our second day on board Serenity. They were both sixty-two years old, but looking pretty damn good for their age. Of course, the rigorous exercise regime that Angel and I had them following on a daily basis helped, even if most of that exercise was horizontal.

Our first day on board had mostly been spent settling into our quarters, which were surprisingly roomy and comfortable. The bunk built into the bulkhead was plenty big enough for two, with a mattress that seemed firm enough to stand up to the pounding it would receive during the four day voyage. The walls were painted a soft green that gave the cabin a feeling of airiness, and we even had a porthole and view-screen to entertain us. The only negative was that the small bathroom had only a vibe shower, which left Matthew grumbling for a while until I found a way to distract him.

You can guess how.



We'd only emerged for meals, which took place in a large central kitchen/dining/living area. A table large enough for everyone to gather around ran down the center of the room, and the crew of the Serenity took it in turns to cook. On our first evening, Jack's Exec—who also had roles as second engineer and pilot—cooked dinner, and as a special treat for us all, she cooked a traditional Brazilian meal, showcasing her native cuisine.

Ana Clara Rocha-Clayton was a beautiful, strong, intelligent woman, and I could totally understand why her husband was devoted to her, despite his wandering eyes and flirtatious manner, neither of which bothered her in the slightest. She was genuinely amused at the compliments and innuendos that Frank directed towards me during the meal.

Matthew didn't find Frank quite so funny and became somewhat possessive, putting his arm around my waist, and dragging me back to our cabin as soon as dinner was over.

I rather enjoy Matthew getting a little jealous at times, and I have to admit that I played up to Frank, just to watch as my husband went into caveman mode. He didn't quite throw me over his shoulder to drag me back to his cave, but it wasn't far off it.

What I also enjoyed was Matthew showing me, very thoroughly, why I had no need to consider letting another man stray into my cave. The shielding for our quarters took quite a hammering that night and the mattress got comprehensively stress tested.

We started celebrating Matthew's birthday as soon as we awoke the second day on board, and I made sure he knew how much I appreciated him and his painstaking attention to detail during the previous night's activities. I was equally meticulous in taking him into my mouth, using my tongue and teeth to lift him to the edge of orgasm, before I pulled back then mounted him, giving him a special birthday reverse cowgirl ride.

By the time we left our cabin, it's fair to say that we had each had our every orifice exhaustively explored and we were both limping slightly, but smiling in satisfaction. When we arrived in the dining room I noticed that Jack and Angel had similar satisfied grins on their faces, and all appeared to be well between them again. I suspect that Jack's birthday had started with as big a bang as Matthew's had.

Breakfast cooking duty had fallen to Shukar Trkider, the Drazi first engineer and weapons expert, who was the sixth member of Serenity's crew. I learned that Harry worked with Shukar on the ship's weapons, which Matthew told me later were much more extensive and powerful than was normal for a ship the size of Serenity. That doesn't surprise me; Jack would make sure that the most precious thing in his life—his wife, that is, not the ship—was well protected.

What did surprise me—and what left Matthew with his chin resting on the table—was learning that Angel had recently qualified for her Captain's ticket, and that she was now officially Co-Captain of Serenity. I was nearly in hysterics as Angel teased my husband over breakfast, saying that as it was Jack's birthday, she was giving him the day off, and that for today, she should be referred to by everyone as Captain Denier-Gideon.

Ana Clara and Frank played up to her of course, carefully referring to her as Captain every time they spoke to her. Jack couldn't hide his amusement, and Harry just looked a little bewildered. Shukar cut short the teasing by serving a substantial breakfast which included some Drazi dishes I hadn't tried before. I linked to Angel and checked that the food included nothing I would find objectionable—I'm pretty omnivorous but there are some things even I draw the line at—and once she had assured me that the dishes were vegetarian, I tucked in with rather more enthusiasm than sense.

One dish had me wishing I hadn't tried it, although I was too polite to spit it out, which is what I would have preferred. I could see Matthew smiling as he watched me, no doubt well aware that I was going to have to swallow when I would much rather have spat. Well, it wouldn't be the first time he'd watched me do that!

Gifts were given and opened when we'd finished eating, and Jack seemed particularly pleased with the new Comm bracelet I'd gotten for him. It included the latest upgrade of touch controls, so that he didn't have to speak out loud when he wanted to contact anyone and he could give surreptitious orders via the touch pad if he wanted. I saw the narrow-eyed look Jack gave Matthew as I explained the controls, and also saw Matthew trying—and failing—to look innocent. There was definitely something going on between them, and I decided to interrogate Matthew about it later. We'd both enjoy that.

The remainder of the day before dinner was spent resting in our cabin, and for once we really did rest. Even Matthew and I have to take an occasional break from sex! So we read, listened to music, watched TV, talked, relaxed and just enjoyed each other's company, in a way we rarely got the opportunity to do at home. Days like that, rare as they are, remind me that I not only love and lust for my husband, but I really like him, too. He's a kind, smart, witty man who makes me laugh and I will never stop appreciating how lucky I am that he loves me.

It was Harry's turn to prepare dinner that night, and I was surprised to learn that he was considered the best cook on the ship. The dinner he served us that night proved the point. The soup was delicious, the fish cooked to perfection, and his main course of Beef Wellington was a revelation,

with crispy pastry and the meat done to a turn inside. He admitted that Angel had helped with the decoration of the birthday cake he'd prepared for our dessert, but he'd baked the cake himself, and it was delightfully light and fluffy. The wine accompanying dinner flowed freely and I can only thank the great god Booji that no one was needed at the controls, as I honestly don't think anyone could have flown straight by the end of the evening.

By the time Matthew and I turned in, we were so completely stuffed with food and woozy with alcohol that we fell asleep before we could even think about making love. That's not something that happens very often.

21st September 2288

The following morning it was Frank's turn to prepare breakfast and after the gut-busting dinner and somewhat excessive alcohol consumption of the night before, I was relieved to see that he had prepared delicious looking croissants, with butter, preserves and strong black coffee. It was a subdued group that gathered to pick at the food that morning, and Ana Clara, Frank, Harry and Shakur soon dispersed to their various duties around the ship.

Jack had just started to rise from the table when Matthew said, quietly, "Before you go, there's something I need to discuss with you."

Jack sat down again, and along with Angel and I, looked at Matthew in puzzlement, wondering what was making him so serious.

Matthew continued as he looked from Jack to Angel and back, "I have a confession to make. I had another reason for asking the two of you to make the trip to Eriadne with Deborah and me, other than the pleasure of your company." He gave a rather sardonic smile as he said this, so I kicked his ankle under the table.

Wincing slightly, he went on, "The Rangers have been getting some reports of new tech appearing on the black market. Well, when I say new tech, I really mean old tech. Very old tech. Specifically, Shadow Tech."

This was the first I'd heard of this and I shuddered at the thought of what it could mean. The Shadows had left the galaxy to travel beyond the Rim with the other elder races, including the Vorlons, over twenty years before. But a client race of the Shadows, the Drakh, had remained behind and had been harassing and fighting with the ISA ever since. Notably, they'd infected Earth with a plague which had threatened to kill all ten billion people on the planet until Matthew and the crew of the Excalibur had found a cure. In Jack's universe, he hadn't been so fortunate and there everyone on Earth had died.

So Shadow tech was evil stuff and it being made available for sale on the black market was seriously bad news. As well as the Drakh, there were far too many other malicious people around who could put it to unscrupulous uses. There were Raiders for a start, as well as some of the races that belonged to the ISA, who wouldn't be averse to the covert use of such technology. It was that kind of thing that the Rangers existed to fight, prevent and control. As Entil'Zha, or Ranger One as he was also known, it was Matthew's job to lead the Rangers in that fight.

Before any of us could ask questions, Matthew continued, "The Rangers have been back-tracking this Shadow Tech, trying to find the source, using some of our best under-cover operatives."

I couldn't help but wonder if those operatives included Mal Fillion, an old lover of Angel's, whom we had last seen on Minbar before the mission to Nabula four years earlier. I knew he was one of Matthew's most effective clandestine investigators.

"We've tracked the sales back to this sector of space, which led me to become suspicious about what might be happening on Eriadne. We all know that the Shadows had a base there before the Vorlons took over, and that it was the information Max Eilerson found in the Shadow ruins that ultimately led to us developing a cure to the Drakh plague."

Matthew leaned forward and his expression became pained. "Max always assured us that he'd never revealed the source of the material he found on Eriadne to IPX or anyone else, but this is Max we're talking about, so..." My husband left his sentence unfinished and I couldn't help but sigh.



Matthew and Max had not been on good terms after a mission to Cygnus 36 over sixteen years before. Max had done some incredibly stupid things there that had resulted in several deaths, including one of the Excalibur's crew. Matthew had never really forgiven the Xenoaarcheologist for that. They'd been on slightly better terms after meeting at Jack and Angel's wedding, when Max had finally apologised, but they'd still only tolerated each other right up until Max had died in the skies over Nabula. It was hardly surprising if Matthew was suspicious that Max could have been the cause of the current problems.

Jack had no such history with Max, and was therefore more inclined to defend him. He leaned forward and said, "If Max had let anyone know about the Shadow ruins, surely the tech would have surfaced long ago. He's been dead for four years now. So why would this only emerge as a problem now? Why not sooner?"

Matthew sighed. "You could be right. This has only cropped up over the last few months, so maybe I'm doing Max's memory a disservice. But regardless, Eriadne needs checking out, as a possible source of the technology and weapons getting out into the black market. There's some nasty stuff getting loose and we don't want any more of it falling into the wrong hands. Not that there are any right hands for some of the things we've seen."

Angel said quietly, "So that's why you wanted to go to Eriadne is it, Matt? Not just for a vacation and to see if Nikarran's grandson is suitable for the Rangers."

Matthew nodded. "If you're willing, I'd like you and Jack to do some nosing around among the merchants on Eriadne. The village below the castle has grown into a small town now, and there's a fair amount of trading done between the colonists and the Brakiri home planet. It's possible that some tech is being smuggled out from the ruins into the town and from there onto Brakir, where it's distributed more widely. With Jack's trading background, he's more likely to be accepted by the

merchants as willing to do clandestine deals, while Angel's history with the villagers should make her less suspicious to them. Deborah and I will keep out of your way while you're making contacts in town. If you're willing to help, of course."

This was all news to me and I raised an eyebrow as I looked my husband in surprise. He was taking a lot for granted and I wasn't sure I was happy about him using Jack and Angel in the way he proposed. I suspect he knew this and raised his hand before I could speak.

"Look, I'm sorry I couldn't discuss this with any of you before, but I wanted this trip to look as innocent as possible. The only other people who know my plans are Trulann and Marcus Cole. If you don't want to take the risk of getting involved, then I'll understand. I'll find another way to investigate and we really will just have a vacation and test Kullkarren." Matthew reached over and took my hand, raising it to his lips to kiss before he went on, "You all know that I will never do anything that would endanger Deborah, or any of you."

I squeezed his hand at the same time as blowing a rather loud raspberry. "You know damned well that Angel and I—well, particularly Angel—can take care of ourselves and will probably end up having to look after the two of you."

That made Angel laugh and I saw her rest her hand on Jack's arm, smiling lovingly up at him as she said, "Absolutely! There's a few more years of wear left in this husband before I'll be looking to trade him in for a new model."

Jack looked back at her fondly and leaned forward to kiss her briefly but passionately, before turning to Matthew and saying, "It looks like you've got yourself a couple of spies, Matt. So let's get some more detailed planning in place."

We spent the rest of the day going over the information that Matthew had brought along with him and planning our approach to Eriadne in detail. We decided not to bring Serenity's crew in on our plans any more than we needed to, letting them think that Jack and Angel were just taking the opportunity to do a little light trading while they were on Eriadne. No mention would be made of Shadow tech, smugglers or black markets.

Angel and I got dinner ready together that evening, harking back to the days when we'd lived in England together in the 20th century and after that in the castle on Eriadne. We'd often cooked together then, and we quickly found ourselves settling back into our usual roles, with me making a main course, while Angel produced a delicious dessert.

The supplies carried by Serenity really were amazingly varied and extensive, and the Coq au Vin I produced that evening was complimented by all, even by Frank who said it was as good as the one his old Quebecois mother used to make.

I don't think I've ever been so flattered, especially as I could feel he was telling the truth. I was blushing as he gushed with enthusiasm for my cooking, which made everyone laugh and while his continued compliments thereafter may have veered a little away from the food we'd eaten, Frank's flattery certainly did my ego good.

I'm not saying exactly how Matthew reacted to my blushes and flirting, but I can at least tell you I got thoroughly spanked when we got back to our quarters and I enjoyed every minute of it. It was, after all, only fair that ALL my cheeks ended up blushing.

22nd September 2288

The last day of our voyage was uneventful with one exception. As we jumped out of hyperspace and into the Eriadne system, Jack called us all to the bridge and pointed out the large comet that was making its way through the planetary system, heading for the sun. It left a huge trail of gas behind it, giving it a spectacular tail. "Is this common in this system, do you know?" He queried Angel and me.

We both shook our heads and Angel replied, "Not that I know of. We never saw a comet in our time on the planet and I don't recall the Brakiri villagers ever talking about one, do you?" She turned and looked at me quizzically.

I shook my head. "No, and I'm sure they would have done, as the Brakiri are a bit superstitious about comets, aren't they?"

Matthew nodded, saying, "They only have one comet in their home system which comes around roughly every two hundred years. When it passes Brakir, they celebrate something called the Day of the Dead, and supposedly their ancestors visit them to give advice and warnings. Comets are a symbol of death and transformation to the Brakiri, so if this one is visible from Eriadne, it's likely to be a pretty big deal."

My husband has learned a lot about the history and culture of all the ISA member races since he became Entil'Zha, although he'd already known a lot from his time in command of a multi-species crew on the Excalibur. He asked Jack, "How big will that tail look from down on the planet do you think?"

Jack checked his instruments. "Big. The direction it's coming in from will make it look pretty spectacular at night from the planet's surface. That should set the cat among the pigeons."

Jack was right, of course. The Brakiri villagers tended to be superstitious about many things and seeing a huge symbol of death emblazoned across their sky wouldn't do anything to make them feel at ease. It looked like we could have an interesting visit ahead.

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We arrived in orbit around Eriadne just as dawn was breaking over the castle where Angel and I had lived for years before the Excalibur had arrived and changed our lives forever. We all watched from the bridge as Ana Clara brought us down through the clouds and settled into a landing bay at the new small spaceport that had been created outside the village. To my surprise, I could see that there were four spaces for ships of varying sizes, indicating that the number of visitors to the planet and the amount of trade being done had increased significantly since our time.

One of the empty bays was the perfect size for Serenity, confirming we were expected. I'd sent messages through to Eriadne as soon as Jack and Angel had confirmed their availability for the trip a month earlier, and Frank had contacted them from orbit to let them know we were on our way in.

Serenity settled into her landing bay and I peered out at the buildings surrounding the new spaceport. Matthew had been correct about the changes that had occurred; the village outside the castle was no longer a village but was now a small town. The population must have at least doubled over the previous eight years since we'd last visited for Angel and Jack's wedding, and the buildings had increased both in size and number to accommodate the growth.

What had not changed was the castle. It still stood on the hill, looming over the town, stone built on solid foundations of rock, looking as if it would continue to stand for eternity.



I smiled as I remembered standing on the battlements many years before on the day when the landing party from the Excalibur had arrived, with no idea of how that visit would change my life as well as the lives of every human on Earth.

So much had happened in that castle, good and bad, bringing pleasure and pain to us all. I looked over at Angel and saw her holding tightly to Jack's arm, her apprehension obvious. Many of Angel's memories of this place were dark and painful. But then she looked up at her husband and smiled and I knew that she had pushed the darkness away and was only remembering the day when they had married; the happiest day of her life.

Over twenty years had passed since I'd first watched Matthew approach the castle with his crew, and now I was coming back yet again, wondering what the planet held in store for me this time. Pleasure or pain? Most likely, a mixture of both.

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Homecoming

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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