

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

by *The Space Witches*



The orchard

Chapter 9

29th September 2288

Deborah Gideon

It was well into the early hours of the morning before Matthew and I got to bed. After White Star 147 arrived, there were reports to be written, instructions to be given and plans to be worked out. Matthew suggested I go up to bed before him, but I knew if I stayed, I could help and he'd get finished sooner.

*Kirrin had previously advised us that since our time living on Eriadne, a new building had been erected for the Elders' meetings, so Matthew made arrangements for the newly arrived Rangers to take all the artifacts and samples that had been collected at the ruins to the Elders' building the following morning. While he was doing that I contacted Serenity—fortunately Ana Clara answered as I was too tired to deal with Frank's flirting, and yes, I know, I was *really* tired—and arranged for the crates and samples Jack and Angel had taken from Branool's warehouse to be moved to the same location.*

Matthew also asked one of the Rangers to make sure equipment needed to test the samples and compare them to Branool's and Dagool's DNA was made available for the meeting of the Elders as

well as a holographic projector. The last thing he did before we made our way up to bed was to transfer a complete recording of Branool's confession to a data crystal, while I left a message for Nisrina. We needed full details of her team's research and findings put onto a data crystal too, ready for us to present to the Elders.

By the time we made it upstairs we fell into bed and believe it or not, went straight to sleep. It's a very rare occasion when my husband and I don't make love at bedtime, but on this occasion we were just too damned tired. Even having to sleep in the wedding suite rather than the bed in my rooms wasn't sufficient to keep us awake. I couldn't wait until the IPX team was evacuated so I could get my rooms—and my bed—back.

We slept in late the next morning, and made up for our abstinence when we awoke. I sometimes think that lazy, half-asleep sex is the best. It's slow and sensual, unhurriedly arousing each other and building to an extended release that seems to go on forever. I suspect that most of the inhabitants of the castle were either screwing each other or pleasuring themselves by the time I finished projecting my orgasm. And if you think about it, everyone should be thanking us for having them start their day off in the very best possible way.

What can I say? Matthew gets me wound up like a spring then releases me with one hell of a bang.

When we finished, we lay for a while, luxuriating in the comfortable bed—OK, not as good as my bed, but still pretty comfy—and enjoying not being needed by anyone for another couple of hours. It's at times like this that we talk. Matthew tells me what's on his mind and how things are going with his job; I tell him about whatever Ranger class I'm auditing at the time, and how my latest book is going. We talk about the children, the past, the future, our hopes and dreams, politics, literature, music, and anything else that happens to occur to us as we lie in bed, just holding each other, touching each other, until the passion builds again and we go at it like bunnies. To me, this is what love is all about.

That morning, we talked about our dead visitors; literally the ghosts from our pasts. We'd been too busy the previous day to really discuss what had happened and how we felt about it.

I told Matthew some of the things my mother had said, and how I suspected that she too had been a victim of the Vorlons' breeding experiment. I wondered how many generations before her had also been involved. It would have been easy enough in English upper class society of the 19th and early 20th century to force women into marriage with 'suitable' husbands. Women were effectively chattels in that era, with no rights or even property of their own. I told him that I wasn't sure I would ever be able to truly forgive my mother, but at least I felt I had a better understanding of her.

Matthew talked about Galen openly for the first time in years. Since the Technomage had attacked me, he'd rarely mentioned the man he'd once thought of as a close friend, as he knew how angry even the mention of Galen's name made me. The Mage had cost our family so much. He'd broken the bond between me and my daughter and taken away my ability to have children. That had led to me being deprived of any choice when Lucas Buck demanded an heir. Perhaps if I'd still been able to bear a child, I could have persuaded Matthew to let me give Lucas what he wanted, thereby saving Angel from the ordeal she'd gone through. I know there were too many 'what ifs' to truly hold Galen responsible for my sister's pain, but I'm not exactly rational on the subject of that Technomage.

So Matthew had never mentioned his name to me since we'd left Eriadne after Angel's wedding. I knew he and Alwyn had cremated Galen's remains, and that despite his anger, Matthew has grieved for his old friend and for the path the Mage had taken. After the visit from Galen's 'ghost', Matthew was still angry about what the Technomage had done to me—as was I—but he was somewhat placated by the regret Galen had expressed.

That had made it easier for him to remember all the times Galen had helped him and saved his life. For Matthew, there was still no real understanding of how Galen could ever have believed that attacking me when I was pregnant was the right thing to do, but the Mage's acknowledgment of the error and his request for forgiveness had at least taken some heat out of my husband's ire.

I have to admit that my hatred of the man was unchanged. He'd done too much damage for me to ever forgive him. But I didn't tell my husband how I felt. I wasn't going to make him share the burden of my animosity, now he was coming to some resolution of his own feelings.

We then talked for a while about Jack and Angel. Again, there hadn't been time the previous day for us to find out much about their visitors, only that they were a reflection of our own. Jack had also received a visit from Galen, but a different Galen; the Technomage from his own reality.

Like me, Angel had been visited by her mother. All I really knew was that Angel's reunion had been joyful and that her mother had given her information and assurances that had erased some of Angel's resentment about her past. For my sister at least, it had been a happy visit.

"I plan to get Angel on her own later and see if I can find out more about both of their experiences," I told my husband as I snuggled in his arms. That made him laugh and he called me nosy, which made me thump his arm, which led to a tussle and you can guess how that ended.

We eventually—reluctantly—dragged ourselves out of bed for a quick shower then threw on some clothes and got down to the dining room in time for a very late breakfast or more accurately, lunch. To our surprise, everyone was gathered there. It seemed we weren't the only ones who'd stayed in bed late that morning.

Kirrin and Kullkarren had come up to the castle to make sure we would all be ready for our meeting with the Elders. I think they were concerned that after the previous two nights' activities we might oversleep.



Nisrina handed Matthew the data crystal with her team's findings, albeit reluctantly. While she wasn't enthusiastic about sharing her research, she acknowledged the necessity for making sure that the inhabitants of Eriadne understood that nothing was being stolen from them. She then wanted to discuss the evacuation plans for her team, and to find out when the White Star would leave and where it would take them.

Jack and Angel just wanted food, while Baby sat under the table ready to snatch any crumbs that might fall his way. Baby is a beagle, so that comes naturally to him.

Matthew stalled the IPX team, telling them that he would go through the plans with them after our meeting with the Elders and explaining what would be happening there. While he was talking, I had a chance to speak softly to my sister.

*"Do you fancy getting out of the castle for a walk later this afternoon? I haven't had any decent exercise..." I paused and grinned, "...well, any decent *vertical* exercise since we got here."*

Angel laughed and agreed. We decided that after the meeting we'd come back up to the castle, collect Baby—who was staying with Lowanna again while we were out—and go for a walk. Angel told me she'd like to go to the orchard to lay some flowers on Bubba's grave and to give Baby a run off lead, then maybe go down to the spaceport to drop Baby off with Harry, before going out into the woods. She didn't want to take Baby with her outside the castle and town, as she was worried about the local wildlife. Angel had no qualms about our safety, but she didn't want to take any risks with her dog.

Which shows her priorities between her sister and her dog.

I've learned to live with it. Well, mostly. So maybe it still stings a little bit sometimes.

OK, let's move on.

I also wondered if Lowanna might try to kidnap Baby when she left, as the young woman seemed to have become very attached to the little dog. I could foresee tears ahead, but decided to deal with that issue when it arose. Mostly I decided that I'd push Jack between Angel and Lowanna as my sister was unlikely to injure her husband, but she might just try to cremate the archaeologist if she made a move on Baby.

By the time Angel and I had this settled, the IPX team had stood up and were just waiting to collect Baby from where he was now sitting on Angel's knee. They told us that now they had the run of the castle, they planned to spend some time in the library, seeing if there were any books there that might give some clues to the planet's history. I mentally wished them good luck with that. During my years living in the castle, I'd scoured pretty much every book written in any language I could understand for such clues. I'd found nothing. There were a lot of interesting books in the library—several works written by the Marquis De Sade for example—but nothing that gave any information on Eriadne.

Once the xenoarcheologists had left, Jack, Angel, Matthew and I joined Kirrin and Kullkarren in making our way out of the castle.

When we arrived at the new Elders' building it was smaller than I'd expected. Built in the same sandstone as the castle, it was simple in design and only stood out from its neighbors by having two floors above ground. Kirrin explained that the top floor was designed for storage of the Elders' records; the ground floor was the meeting chamber, while below ground there was a cellar which had cells for wrongdoers and a room for the guards when they were on duty.

Perhaps I should explain something about the 'guards' on Eriadne. They were all part-time, carrying out guard duty as the community work that all able-bodied adults were required to perform for a

few hours each month. Most of the guards were also farmers and hunters, while a few were tradespeople from the town.

There was very little crime on Eriadne, but if any of the inhabitants committed any anti-social behavior, the guards would escort them to the cells, keep them there until they sobered up—most of the culprits were drunk when they committed their offences—then send them home with a warning to behave in future. A night in the cells was usually enough to prevent frequent recurrences of bad conduct, although there were of course some committed repeat offenders. Calling on a large number of guards, as we'd done the previous night to escort Branool and Dagool to the cells, meant that only a few would be on duty at the time we came to present our evidence to the Elders.

Kullkarren opened the outer doors and we entered a small lobby with staircases going up to the floor above and down to the cellar below. Immediately ahead were double doors leading into the Elders' Chamber, which took up the whole of the rest of the ground floor. It was paneled with dark wood on all four walls with no windows. The room was lit by sconces, although they were fitted with electric lights, not the flaming torches that would once have been used. Kirrin explained that this gave the feel of the traditional Elders' meetings without the inconvenience of poor lighting and a smoky atmosphere.

Along the back wall of the chamber were seven large carved wooden chairs, the middle one of which was a little grander than the others. To the right of the chairs was a large barred enclosure, the only access to which was through a trapdoor leading up from the cellar below. The rest of the right wall and the whole of the left were taken up by four tiers of benches, giving seating for perhaps sixty or seventy people.

The center of the chamber would usually have been an open space, but at this time it was occupied. Two Rangers stood guard over two separate groups of objects. I knew that on one side were the crates and samples removed from Branool's warehouse, while on the other were the objects and samples taken from the ruins. Between these two groups, a holographic projector had been positioned, as well as the machine required for testing all the samples.

Kullkarren waved us towards the benches on the left of the chamber, immediately opposite the barred enclosure and asked if we would sit in the front row. He joined us, sitting nearest to the empty large chairs positioned along the back wall, while Kirrin waited at the door.

I sat next to Kullkarren and after stopping for a brief word with the Rangers, Matthew sat next to me. Jack and Angel took their places beyond Matthew. The stage was now set; we just needed the other players and an audience.

We didn't have long to wait.

The double doors opened again, and six Brakiri entered, pausing to exchange greetings with Kirrin, before moving to take six of the individual chairs, leaving the central seat vacant. It was apparent that 'Elder' was a courtesy title as the ages of the Brakiri varied from mature adult up to very elderly indeed. There were three women and three men, two of whom I thought I recognized from when I'd lived on Eriadne. I turned to look at the doorway, eager to see who would be the leader of the group, wondering if I might recognize them, as it was obvious that the central chair was reserved for the principal Elder.

Kirrin still waited by the doors as two guards entered and took positions either side of the opening. They were followed by a large group of Brakiri, who soon occupied all the vacant seating on the benches, leaving a few to stand alongside the guards, who turned and closed the doors.

To my astonishment, Kirrin made her way across the center of the room and took the central seat. Our old friend was now the leader of the Elders. She'd given no hint of this at any time since our arrival and I was sure that she couldn't have told Lily beforehand either, as our sister would have let us know such an interesting piece of news—alright, such a juicy bit of gossip—about our old home.

Immediately Kirrin had taken her seat, one of the guards raised the staff he was holding and banged it on the floor. The crowd fell silent as Kirrin rose to her feet.

"We have come here today to hear evidence of a crime committed against our community. The persons accused of this crime will be brought before us now to hear this evidence."

The trapdoor inside the metal cage slid aside, and Branool and Dagool emerged from the cellar. Branool had bruises on his face, which hadn't been there when we'd last seen him. I turned to Kullkarren and he explained in a whisper that Branool had tried to escape on his way into town, and had been subdued by the guards. Dagool looked unharmed so I can only assume that he'd cooperated with his captors.

Branool started protesting his innocence as soon as he entered the barred enclosure, but Kirrin soon silenced him. "You will have your opportunity to speak in due course. As is our custom, one of the Elders will represent you and take your testimony. You and your representative will have the customary twenty days to gather whatever evidence you need to demonstrate your innocence. Another Elder will examine the evidence being presented today, gather any additional information indicative of guilt, and these two Elders will then present the case to the other five of us in twenty days' time. We will then make a decision as to your guilt or innocence. This is our way."

This was rather more formal than proceedings had been twenty years before, when offenders had been presented to the Elders and a decision made on the same day. For a crime of this seriousness, a stricter process seemed appropriate.

Kirrin then called on Matthew to give his evidence. Matthew stood and took a pace forward as he started to speak. "My name is Matthew Gideon and I am giving evidence today in my capacity as Entil'Zha of the Anla'Shok."

My husband explained how the Rangers had first found indications of Shadow Tech weapons being sold on the black market within the ISA and how he had suspected the source of the weapons might be Eriadne, based on what he'd learned on previous visits to the planet. He described how he'd arranged the 'family' trip to Eriadne and Kullkarren's assessment for the Rangers, as a cover for his investigation of his suspicions. He then gave details of what had happened from the day of our arrival up to the time of the mob attack on the IPX team at the ruins.



At this point, Kirrin raised her hand and asked him to stop. "I have asked another witness to this attack to join us."

The doors to the chamber opened and Nisrina entered, looking a little intimidated by the crowd of people inside. Kirrin hurried to reassure the archeologist that she was only required to describe what had happened at the time the mob had attacked the IPX dig. Nisrina moved to stand in front of the Elders, facing them, and gave a concise description of how the mob had appeared and threatened them, causing them to retreat into their shuttle with Shukar from Serenity and how they had called the castle for assistance.

Kirrin again raised her hand. "Can you identify anyone in this room who was present on that day and took part in the attack?"

Nisrina looked around the chamber and I noticed several people turn away, trying to hide their faces, but the archeologist shook her head until she looked at the cage to her right. She then pointed. "Him. The large one with the tattoos. He was in the front line of the people attacking us." Dagoool didn't react to her accusation, just continued to stare passively at the chamber. I wondered if he even understood what was happening.

Kirrin thanked Nisrina for her testimony and advised her that she would be required to make a record of her statement before she left Eriadne, but for the moment, she could return to the castle. Nisrina nodded and left the chamber with her head held high, but I could feel the relief radiating from her that her ordeal was over.

After a nod from Kirrin, Matthew continued his description of events, covering the rescue of the IPX team, although Angel's part in that was played down. I was half-expecting some questions about the woman who had 'hovered' in mid-air during the rescue, but there was nothing. Thinking about it later, I suspected that the villagers who had been present hadn't been talking about exactly what had happened, being too ashamed of their actions that day.

Matthew went on with his story up to the point where the crew from Serenity had gone up to the ruins to guard them from further incursions and to take samples. Kirrin stopped him again, and this time the doors opened to reveal Ana Clara, who stepped forward to give evidence of what they'd found in the ruins and to confirm that the crates and samples in front of her were the ones she, Frank and Harry had collected. She then handed over a data crystal which held the recordings they'd made of their discoveries at the ruins. Again, she was thanked for her testimony and advised that she would be required to make a formal statement before she left Eriadne.

Matthew took up the story again, stopping this time when Jack and Angel had left the castle for their meeting with Branool. The trader had been seething and giving murderous looks at my sister and her husband the whole time the hearing had been proceeding; the hatred he was projecting made me feel a little queasy. I blocked as best I could but his emotions were so powerful it was impossible to keep them out completely, particularly as I wanted to keep myself open to the feelings of everyone else in the chamber, trying to assess how the evidence Matthew and the others had given was being taken. On the whole, the crowd seemed interested and accepting of what they were being told.

Jack took over the testimony at this point. He introduced himself as Jack Gideon, Co-Captain of Serenity and trader in legal/goods across the ISA—his emphasis was clear. He then described the

meeting that had been arranged with Branool, including the location of the warehouse. He explained how he and Angel had overpowered Branool and Dagool, before taking them into custody and moving the stolen weapons to Serenity for safe keeping. Next he confirmed that the second group of crates and samples were those that had been taken from the warehouse and handed over a data crystal containing the recordings he and Angel had taken of all the items while they were still in the warehouse.

There were a few murmurs around the chamber and I could feel a lot of puzzlement and curiosity as to how Jack and Angel had managed to subdue the two Brakiri before moving them and all the crates, but Kirrin allowed Jack to skate over the details and hand the stage back to Matthew.

This time, Matthew just asked the Elder's permission to show a recording of what had happened in the castle crypt. The appropriate data crystal was inserted into the holographic projector and the recording was run. Of course, what hadn't been recorded were the projections of fear that I'd sent and the way Angel had touched Branool using her telekinesis. The recording just showed the trader becoming increasingly frightened by what Matthew was saying until he started to confess, and Matthew catching him out in every lie he tried to tell, without showing that I was signaling from behind the screen. My presence in the crypt was not captured at all, just as we'd planned.

The record appeared to show a clever interrogator playing on the fears of the subject, restraining him, but not physically harming him in any way. Branool kept interrupting, trying to deny the accuracy of the recording, saying it had all been fixed, but the record was clearly timed and dated so no manipulation could have occurred.

Matthew ended with a short speech to the Elders. "I should respectfully apologize to the Elders for any steps I have taken that may be deemed to have exceeded my authority. I appreciate that the Anla'Shok have no jurisdiction on Eriadne and I had no authority to arrest or charge an individual committing offences on this planet. However, in my role as Entil'Zha I am responsible for keeping the peace within the ISA and I believed that the distribution of these weapons was a direct threat to that peace. I therefore had no choice but to take action. I have endeavored at every step to involve at least two of your citizens in the planning and performance of my investigation and..."

Kirrin waved him to a halt. "This is unnecessary, Entil'Zha. I can confirm to my fellow Elders that you advised me of your plans beforehand and asked me to witness the execution of those plans. You may not have the authority to detain or charge individuals, but I do. By allowing you to proceed, I authorized your actions. You have acted entirely within the laws of this colony."

I could feel a wave of relief from my husband, but no one else would ever have known that he'd been concerned about this issue. He really does have a poker face. A ruggedly handsome poker face.

Matthew finished by presenting the data crystal of the IPX team's research to Kirrin, explaining that this gave full details of all their work on Eriadne. She accepted the crystal with a gracious nod and then turned to the prisoners. "You will now supply a sample of your DNA for comparison with the samples taken at the ruins and from the weapons found in your warehouse."

Dagool submitted readily enough, but Branool protested violently and eventually two guards emerged from the cellar below to hold him while the swab was taken.

The swabs were inserted into the machine brought from the White Star for that purpose and some of the samples from the ruins and the warehouse were also entered. It only took a few moments for the comparisons to be carried out and for the results to be displayed. A clear match was found from eight of the samples to Branool's DNA, while five were matched to Dagool.

Kirrin moved to stand but Matthew stepped forward again. "May I make one more request of the Elders while we are here?" Kirrin paused then reseated herself and nodded.

Matthew waved at the crates of weapons gathered from the ruins and the warehouse. "The contents of these crates are extremely dangerous. They cannot be allowed to be distributed, and they are a danger to your community if they remain here. I would like to arrange for them to be safely destroyed and also for the ruins to be sealed to prevent any further intrusions and thefts."

That caused a stir in the chamber, and the Elders started to talk among themselves. Kirrin allowed these discussions to continue for a while then called everyone to order. She frowned at Matthew as she said, "I understand and to some extent share your concerns, Entil'Zha. However, the Elders will need to debate your requests. We will discuss these matters in private and advise you of our conclusions."

I could feel my husband's impatience and desire to argue the point, but he controlled himself and nodded politely. "We will await your decisions with interest, Elder Kirrin."

Kirrin rose, and the rest of the Elders followed her out of the chamber. Branool and Dagool were taken back down to the cells and the rest of the crowd started to file out, eventually leaving just the two Rangers, Kullkarren, Jack, Angel, Matthew and me. We sat silently for a moment then Matthew stood and held his hand out to me.

"Let's get back up to the castle. I've still got a shitload of reports to write, and I need to send a message to Deleenn, advising her on progress."

Jack laughed and said, "I'm glad it's you doing the report writing, not me. I always hated that part of being an Earthforce Captain. But I do need to get down to Serenity and work on some real trading." He turned to Angel and asked, "Are you coming with me?"

Angel smiled, stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'll come down with you now, as I need a few more clothes." Jack's eyes widened but sensibly he said nothing. Only I could feel his surprise and I wondered just how many clothes Angel already had in her rooms. I suspected rather a lot. My sister went on, "I'll take them back up to the castle then Demon and I are going out for a walk. I'll meet up with you in our rooms later, if that's OK?"

Jack nodded and kissed her then the two of them left. While they'd been talking, Matthew had given quiet instructions to the Rangers to stay on guard until they were relieved, telling them he'd send replacements down from the castle later. Then he turned to Kullkarren.

"I want to thank you for all the help you've given us since we arrived, Kullkarren. To be honest, the rest of your assessment is pretty much a formality. If you want, you can come back with us to Minbar and start your Ranger training when the new intake arrives next month. You can spend the

intervening period making a head start on your studies and getting used to the barracks. How does that sound?"

Kullkarren was almost incoherent with excitement and joy. He could hardly stutter out his acceptance and thanks, so I placed my hand on his arm, sending waves of calm until he composed himself.



"I don't know how to express my gratitude, Entil'Zha. I will do my utmost to live up to the trust you have placed in me. Could I ask when you plan to leave Eriadne, so I can prepare my family for my departure?"

Matthew smiled at the young Brakiri and reached out to shake his hand. "I have every confidence in you, Kullkarren. We'll leave the day after tomorrow. Will that give you enough time with your family? The White Star will probably leave tonight, and although they'll be getting back to Minbar sooner, I suspect that might not give you enough time to prepare yourself. You'll also be more comfortable on Serenity, so enjoy the next couple of days, and we'll let you know our exact departure time as soon as we know it ourselves."

Kullkarren nodded violently again, then rushed out through the doors, desperate to tell his family the good news. He came back almost instantly, saying, "Thank you. Did I say thank you? I should have said thank you."

Matthew and I both laughed and waved him on his way, telling him to come up to the castle if he had any questions or even if he didn't; we'd be happy to see him.

Kullkarren left at a run again, leaving Matthew and I alone. I turned to face my husband and said, "You just made that young man very happy."

My husband laughed. "I don't need to be an empath to figure that one out. Now you can tell me what was going on with Kirrin. How did she really feel about the request to destroy the weapons and seal the ruins?"

I smiled and said, "She agrees with you completely. But some of the other Elders were less certain, so she's bought herself some time to talk them round." I shook my head and went on, "Who would have guessed that our old friend had become the most powerful person on Eriadne? She's come a long way."

Matthew nodded. "I wish she'd told us beforehand. I wouldn't have been half as worried about today if I'd known that I already had the Chief Elder on our side." He smiled at me again and said, "Now what's this about you and Angel going off and leaving Jack and me this afternoon? Don't you think we need supervising today?"

That earned him a gentle thump on the arm, which elicited the usual protest. "I just want to spend some time with my sister. You have lots to do with all your reports, so for once I'll leave you to it. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

We made our way out of the Elders' chambers, leaving the two Rangers on guard, walking back up to the castle arm in arm and content with the world.

Sitting on the bench in the flower garden, the warm sun washing over me and the silence unbroken by anything other than the gentle buzzing of insects, I closed my eyes to enjoy the peace and quiet. It couldn't last of course.

The bench moved as Angel sat down and I felt two paws land on my knee. I opened my eyes as my sister said, "Wake up! You're snoring so loud the castle is vibrating."

I snorted my contempt for that statement then realized that the noise I'd just produced was distressingly like the snore I'd just denied making. "I wasn't asleep and I don't snore."

That sent Angel into a fit of giggles. "That's not what Matthew says."

I treated that statement with contempt too, by choosing to ignore it. I'd have words with my husband later. I looked at the basket Angel was carrying and said, "Do you have quite enough flowers there?" The basket was full to overflowing with blooms of every size, shape and color.

Angel nodded seriously. "I think so. Did you bring the vase and water I asked for?"

My sister had linked to me as Matthew and I had made our way back to the castle, making her request. I pointed to the bag at my feet. "In there. I brought a couple of different vases for you to choose from, but I think you might need both. Although I don't understand why you couldn't bring them here yourself; you had to go into the castle to drop off your things and pick up Baby."

Angel pointed at her dog and the basket. "I had my hands full and it took me rather longer than I'd planned to get Baby. Lowanna seemed reluctant to give him up. I'm not letting her babysit him again; I'm not sure I'd get him back!" I kept my lips sealed but nodded in silent agreement.

By this time, Baby had settled at our feet, basking in the late afternoon sun. The three of us sat silently for a while then Angel sighed. "I think we might have to postpone our walk. By the time we've given Baby a run in the orchard and I've taken him back down to Harry, it will be getting dark. Not a good time for a walk in the woods."

She was right of course. When I'd suggested the walk I hadn't realized the meeting of the Elders would last so long. "Let's take a rain check and see how tomorrow goes. If nothing else comes up, maybe we can get out after lunch." I stood up and lifted the bag with the vases and water to my shoulder, then nodded at the basket Angel had laid on the ground. "Come on; let's get down to the orchard."

We made our way out of the walled garden, through the gate into the orchard, which was fully enclosed by a high stone wall. As soon as we'd shut the gate behind us, Angel let Baby off his leash and he went running off, sniffing everything in his path, his tail straight up in the air, wagging enthusiastically. My sister and I followed at a rather more sedate pace until we arrived at the place where Harry's brother, Bubba, was buried.

I stood at the side of the grave and lowered my bag to the ground while Angel knelt by the small stone that marked the head of the burial site. The stone was roughly carved with the name 'BUBBA' and a date. The date the poor man had died after being attacked by venomous avians.

Angel first tidied away the flowers that Harry had brought a few days earlier. They'd wilted and died where he'd left them with no water. Then, as she pulled out the vases, filled them with the water I'd brought and started to arrange the flowers she'd picked, I lowered myself to the ground and watched her. I knew she felt guilty about Bubba's death as she was convinced that Lucas Buck had caused it, and my sister felt remorse for every death that Lucas had caused. If she hadn't released him from the Apocalypse Box, none of those people would have died. I might not be able to read my sisters' emotions in the way I can other people, but I know Angel well enough to sense her shame at what she'd done and the consequences that had followed. Time didn't seem to erase or even ease her regrets.

Personally, I had mixed feelings about Bubba. Yes, he was probably one of Lucas' many victims, and like his brother Harry, Bubba hadn't been the sharpest pencil in the box. In case you wondered, that's an old Earth saying. Do I really need to explain it to you? OK, a pencil was something that you used to write with... Hold on; you're just giving me a hard time, aren't you? Shame on you.

Harry had a stronger intellect than his brother, and the poor man wasn't exactly bright. But he made up for his lack of intelligence with a sweet nature and a good heart. I'd only met Bubba once, but Angel assured me that he'd been very similar to Harry. What I could never forget was that Bubba had shot and nearly killed my husband. That was one act I found almost impossible to forgive.

But that had happened long ago, and I'd learned over the years that carrying grudges only hurt the carrier, so I'd tried to let go of the resentments and anger at people who'd hurt me. With one or two exceptions, of course. I'm sure you know who I'm talking about, and both of them had visited the castle on the Day of the Dead before returning to whatever hell they deserved. A perfect pairing; a Technomage and my mother. Which is what led me to say to Angel, as she finished arranging the flowers, "Tell me about your visit from your mother."

Angel turned to me and the smile that lit up her beautiful face illuminated her from inside. It was a smile of pure happiness. She moved to sit next me, at the side of Bubba's grave and started to talk.

"It was wonderful, Demon. She was so beautiful, just like she was before she got sick. She told me how much she loved me. It was amazing to hear her speak again, with that soft Cajun lilt of hers, calling me the names she always used. I was her chérie and her minette; her kitten. And she talked about our father."

Angel turned to kneel facing me and took my hand in hers. "She told me a lot about our father, Demon. You probably know that I've always been a little envious that you got to spend time with him and that he loved you. I never got to meet him; he was gone before I was born. Well, once Alwyn told me about the Shadows' breeding plan and how the Vorlons had subverted it, I believed I was just the result of an assignment. Just a job our father was given to do."

I could see the hurt in my sister's eyes and leaned forward to hug her, but she pushed me away gently. "It's OK. Mama told me about him, how she loved him and how he loved her, too. He was her angel, her Rafael who came to love her, and that's why she named me Angelique. It was her way of giving me something of his: the only thing she had left of him to give."

I smiled and squeezed her fingers. "I'm glad. I don't remember much about him, as I was only five when he left, but I do remember him as tall and handsome with amazing blue eyes, and I remember that he loved me. I'll never forget the love. That's what made it so hard..." I trailed off, not willing to say more, closing my eyes on the remembered pain and grief of loss.



I felt Angel come and sit beside me again, putting her arm around me and giving me a gentle hug. "He was a good man, Demon. He loved you and he loved me, too. Mama told me how they'd lie together, with him resting his hand on her belly, telling her how she was carrying the most beautiful daughter in the world. He told her about his other beautiful daughter who he'd had to leave behind and how much he loved her and missed her. He loved us both."

By this time we were both in tears and I wrapped my arms around my little sister and hugged her hard. Once we'd got ourselves under control, I produced a handkerchief from my sleeve, gave my nose a good blow, then looked across at Angel, who was wiping her eyes and nose with the back of her hand. I laughed and said, "You've brought almost the entire contents of your wardrobe up from Serenity, but you haven't brought a hankie, have you?"

Angel started to laugh as she shook her head and I laughed with her, finding a clean tissue in the pocket of my jeans, which I handed over to her. Then we sat quietly for a while, just looking at Bubba's grave, listening to Baby rooting around in the undergrowth, as the sun slowly descended towards the horizon. Eventually, Angel asked, "So how did your visit go? Was it hard?"

I nodded. "I've hated my mother for so long and seeing her again brought back all the anger and resentment I felt towards her. She apologized for how she'd behaved to me, and I think she was genuinely sorry, but it's hard to forgive that degree of neglect. But I think I understand her a bit better now, and maybe that will help me to let go of all the pain. One day. Maybe."

Angel hugged me again, and we lapsed back into silence until I asked, "What about Jack? How did his visit go?"

Angel's face changed immediately as she frowned. "His Galen came to give him a warning that was so vague it was pretty useless. But he also admitted that he'd told the Technomage council about the Eriadne in his universe, which resulted in this place, and all the inhabitants, being destroyed."

This left me breathless and furious. In Jack's universe he'd been unable to find the cure to the Drakh plague and ten billion people had died as a result. All because he'd gotten to Eriadne too late so never found the regenerator technology and the writings in the ruins. He never found the equivalents of me and my sisters, because they'd been killed by the Technomages. If I thought Galen had been responsible for too much death and destruction in my reality it paled into insignificance when compared with what he'd done in Jack's universe.

I eventually shook myself free of shock and asked, "And did he have the temerity to ask for forgiveness for his actions?"

Angel shook her head. "Not really. He just made excuses that it wasn't directly his doing and that he'd died horribly, so didn't that make up for it? Jack told him to go back to hell where he belonged."

I nodded my agreement. I may have tried to move on and not allow myself to be burdened by grudges and hatred but some sins were too egregious to be forgiven.

My sister and I lapsed into silence again, until Baby came back and started barking at us. Angel laughed. "He wants his dinner. Anyone who says dogs can't tell time has never had a dog."

I laughed with her. "Oscar's the same. Maybe we'd better get back to the castle. I want a nice long soak in a hot bath before dinner."

I walked out of the bathroom, happy and relaxed from my bath, a towel wrapped around me, to find my husband in the bedroom. He'd just removed his shirt and he turned to face me, his hands resting on the top button of his pants. The smile he gave me sent shivers down my spine, and his voice was low and sensual as he said, "I think we're both a little overdressed, don't you?"

I dropped the towel and moved to help him get his pants off, as I wanted what was inside them to be inside me, and I wanted it now! Fortunately, Matthew and I often think alike, so I got what I wanted. I got it from behind, bent over the end of bed and I got it hard and fast.

All thoughts of past pain were banished by present pleasure. All feeling of loss and grief were replaced by overwhelming love. My love for Matthew and his love for me.

We were a little late for dinner that night, which was unfortunate as we had guests. On our way down, Matthew told me that Kirrin had asked if she could join us and he'd agreed. He'd also invited the Captain of White Star 147, Andy Bentley, to join us. With our IPX guests still at the castle, that made nine for dinner. I suspected it was going to get interesting, and I wasn't wrong.

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