

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

by *The Space Witches*



A White Star ship

Chapter 10

29th September 2288

Angelique Denier-Gideon

It felt like I spent most of the day walking up and down the hill to and from the castle. The temptation just to teleport was nearly overwhelming, but that was one aspect of my powers we didn't want to become general knowledge to the townspeople, so I gritted my teeth and told myself the exercise was good for me. As my sister had said, I hadn't been getting nearly enough vertical exercise since arriving on Eriadne. The special little gift Demon had given me for my birthday had certainly increased the amount of horizontal exercise I'd been getting! At least I now knew how Matt and Demon managed to go at it like bunnies so often without her getting too sore.

Jack planned to pirate the design and get it out into the market fast, before Matt could get a patent in place. I hadn't decided whether to tell Demon about that as yet. One of several things I was mulling over whether to mention to my sister.

So I walked down to the meeting in the Elders' chambers, where I was a good girl and kept my mouth shut. You have no idea how difficult that is sometimes. When Jack said, "We overpowered them," I wanted to spit. We? WE? Who exactly did the punch to the brain stem, huh? Who targeted two Brakiri, one the same size as the Incredible Hulk, and zapped them both at once? There was no 'we' about it. It was me, me, ME! But I was a good girl, bit my lip and said nothing.

The whole procedure in front of the Elders had been difficult for me, as it brought back horrible memories of when I'd been put on trial on Mars for a crime I didn't commit. But I pushed those memories aside, and decided that I might just forgive my husband, because he sensed how uncomfortable the whole thing made me feel, so held my hand tightly all the way through and kept

whispering reassurances to me. So maybe I'll keep him for a bit longer after all. He does have his uses.

He demonstrated one of those uses very clearly after we got back to Serenity, where we managed a few—quite a few—very happy minutes of horizontal activity before I ran back up to the castle again with a few more clothes in a backpack. Don't ask me why I needed more clothes.

OK, if you insist, I needed more knickers as for some reason all mine had got ripped. Too much information? Well, you did ask!

On the way back up the hill, I linked to Demon to ask her to pick up a vase and some water, and meet me in the orchard. Fortunately, the fact that I was running and gasping for breath wasn't apparent through our link, so she didn't ask why I'd taken so long on Serenity. And yes, she would have asked, because she's nosy. She and her husband are two of the nosiest people I know.

You can keep any comments about me and Jack to yourself. Really.

I burst into the castle, raced up to my rooms to drop off my backpack then ran up to Demon's rooms—I was seriously out of breath by the time I got up there—and collected Baby for his walk. Lowanna seemed reluctant to hand him over, and I wondered if I might have to have words about who Baby belonged to. I know she'd been Baby-sitting quite a lot over the previous couple of days, but I'd been busy saving the galaxy! That, and having ghost visitors and banging my husband hadn't left much time for sleep, never mind dog walking.

Having pried Baby out of Lowanna's grasping hands, I ran out of the castle again, stopping briefly at the garden shed to pick up a basket. I saw Demon sitting on a bench and went to sit next to her but then realized she was fast asleep and snoring. Suppressing a giggle, I tiptoed past her and took Baby down to the far end of the garden to cut some flowers. It was then I realized I'd forgotten to bring scissors, but fortunately I always carry a knife concealed about my person somewhere—I'm not saying where—which was very convenient.

It was only when I'd got my breath back and cut what I needed that I made my way over to Demon and woke her up. I knew she was still asleep as I'd been able to hear her snores at the other end of the garden. It's amazing that poor Matt ever gets any sleep with the sound of a pneumatic drill next to him in bed every night. OK, maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but the poor man does have the Rangers to run and galactic peace to maintain. I'm amazed he doesn't insist on separate rooms. Then again, if he did, he couldn't screw my sister into the mattress every chance he gets. No wonder she needs her little toy. Gideon men are demanding lovers but they do give as good as they get. Oh boy, do they!

Once the sleeping beauty awoke, we walked through to the orchard and let Baby off his leash. I arranged the flowers on Bubba's grave and then my sister and I talked.

We talked about mothers and fathers, Technomages, Vorlons and Shadows. We laughed and we cried and as usual I didn't have a hankie but Demon had a spare. I didn't tell her that I'd discovered I'd once had another half-sister because I didn't think she needed to know. That sister would have died hundreds of years ago and light years away, so her existence was hardly relevant today. The only person I might tell about her is my husband. Maybe. One day.

So as the sun dropped closer to the horizon, Demon went back to the castle and I ran down to Serenity again and dropped Baby off with Harry. Yes, I know it would have been easier to take him into the castle, but Lowanna was joining us for dinner, so I didn't have a Baby-sitter handy there. And Harry loves Baby and had been missing him for the previous couple of days.

It was dark by the time I left Serenity, and Jack had gone up to the castle long before. Looking around carefully, I bit my lip and decided to take a risk; I teleported to the corridor outside my rooms in the castle, breathing a sigh of relief when it was empty. Jack was waiting inside for me, already dressed for dinner in black jeans and a white silk shirt, buttoned up to the neck. I was torn between a growl of desire as he looked so sexy and a shudder of fear, because he reminded me so much of Lucas when he dressed like that. Desire won and I flowed into his arms, pulling his head down into a long kiss that took both our breaths away.

Jack gently pushed me away and smiled down at me. "We need to get downstairs soon, so be a good girl and get showered and dressed as quick as you can."

I pouted a little but knew he was right. I was clean, dressed and ready to go in almost record time for me. As we descended the stairs into the main entrance hall, a wave of pleasure swept through us. I giggled and Jack groaned. "I wish he'd stop doing that to her. Now I'm going to be limping into dinner with an erection."

I laughed again and told him to think of icebergs, then said, "They're cutting it very fine. I hope our guests haven't arrived." While I'd been getting ready Jack had told me that Kirrin and the White Star Captain would be joining us for dinner.

Jack smiled as we crossed the hall to the door of the dining room. "I would have thought Kirrin was familiar with Demon's sendings by now. When Matt really gets her going the whole town must feel it. Talking of Matt, I must..."

He stopped speaking as we entered the dining room to find the IPX team waiting for us, but no one else. Nisrina smiled at us as we entered and said, "We were discussing that strange phenomenon that just occurred. It's happened several times each day since we've been in the castle, but none of us has ever experienced anything like it before. It's quite..." she paused, searching for the correct word, "...stimulating. Do you know what causes it?"

She looked at us quizzically and I had real trouble keeping a straight face. Jack answered seriously, "I believe it's some sort of weird atmospheric condition, unique to Eriadne. I'm not sure if the locals have ever identified the exact source, but I think they believe it's caused by 'magic', possibly by witches or even something demonic."

Of course, he said this with a poker face and an earnest manner. My husband is a really good liar when he wants to be, because he always adds a sprinkling of truth to his lies, making them more believable. You can imagine how difficult I found it to control my laughter by the time he finished speaking. But Nisrina wouldn't let it go. She started talking about local superstitions and how it would be interesting to investigate this phenomenon.

Jack nodded seriously then said, "It might be difficult to get the funding for such a study. It's such a localized event, and is so unpredictable. You never can tell when it might happen. Perhaps you

should talk to Entil'Zha Gideon about it; he might be able to suggest a way to further your investigations."

That earned my husband a hard dig in the ribs. Fortunately, at that moment the doors to the dining room opened and Kirrin entered, escorted by the White Star Captain, who introduced himself as Andy Bentley. He was a short, stocky man, with blue eyes and sandy hair. He had an air of reliability about him somehow; he was the sort of man who would stay calm in a crisis and who could be depended upon to deliver what was required of him.



Introductions had only just been completed when Matt and Demon entered the room, arm in arm. My sister was wearing a simple black dress, but it displayed her cleavage in a way that drew every man's eyes like magnets. Demon made her way around our guests, greeting each of them and thanking them for joining us. She does the gracious lady of the manor act extremely well when she wants to. Of course, she can also swear like a drunken sailor when it suits her, too.

We sat around the large table and enjoyed a pleasant and satisfying dinner, with conversation kept light and general. We'd just finished dessert when Kirrin, speaking to Matt, addressed him as Entil'Zha Gideon. Matt laughed and said, "One of these

days I'll get you to call me Matt."

I couldn't help but giggle and Jack snorted with laughter too. I dug my elbow into my husband's ribs again and said, "Perhaps Kirrin would prefer to call you Matthew." I turned to Kirrin and asked, "Would that be more appropriate?"

Kirrin smiled and nodded. "Much better." She turned and looked at Matt with a twinkle in her eye. "Is Matthew acceptable to you?"

Matt looked puzzled but nodded anyway. "Of course. That's my name after all. Matt is just a short form. Is there a problem with Matt?"

Every time he repeated the word Jack snorted and I giggled. Kirrin turned to us and looked disapproving. "I suspect you two have been learning Brakiri profanities. Can I ask who educated you? I might have to have words with them."

I sobered up quickly and admitted that Branool had used a certain word during our meeting with him and had told us the meaning. Matt continued to look confused, while Demon was glaring at me. She may not have understood the word, but she could certainly pick up on Jack's amusement, if not mine.

Kirrin frowned at my husband, who was still having difficulty suppressing his mirth. "Branool has more things to worry about than my disapproval of his translation skills, but perhaps he didn't explain that there is another word used in the local dialect that sounds very like Captain Gideon's first name."

That wiped the smile off Jack's face, and Matt looked less confused and more interested. He said, "Oh, please tell, Kirrin. What's the word and what does it mean?" He was grinning like a lunatic by this time.

Kirrin looked from Matt to Jack and back again, obviously weighing up whether she should speak or not. She glanced at me and I couldn't help but smile and nod, egging her on. She smiled back and said, "Very well. Mat is that part of the anatomy used for the expulsion of waste products. Jack—or more correctly, jeck—is a name for the male reproductive organ, but more specifically, a very small example of such."

The table was silent for a moment then there was an explosion of laughter. Demon pulled herself together first and pointed at her husband and mine, saying, "So we have an asshole and a little prick; I can't think of a better deserved pair of names for the two of you."

Matt and Jack just looked at each other, but I could see that they both had identical twitches at the corner of their mouths as they fought to suppress their own amusement. It was Matt who broke first, saying, "I guess that just about sums us up. Let's leave it at that and from now on, I'm Matthew and Jack is Captain Gideon."

Kirrin nodded graciously again and smiled at them both to show she was amused by the whole issue. She wasn't alone in that.

Once we'd all settled down again, Matt—sorry, Matthew—turned to Kirrin and asked, "Did the Elders reach any conclusion about the requests I made this afternoon?"

Kirrin nodded again. "Yes. As I hoped, it was agreed that you can take the weapons away for destruction, and also seal the ruins to prevent any recurrence of these thefts. We do not want any colonist tempted to repeat what Branool has done. He has brought shame on the whole community."

Matt spoke quickly, telling her that the acts of one individual wouldn't taint the reputation of the colony, and they were still held in high esteem by the Anla'Shok and by President Delenn herself, as she had told him when he'd spoken to her earlier in the day. This made Kirrin smile and nod graciously again.

"Thank you, Matthew, for your kind assurances. Now, could you tell me how you plan to dispose of the artifacts and how you will seal the ruins?"

This led to a discussion between Bentley and Matt, and it was agreed that the Rangers would take the artifacts to the White Star. After they left Eriadne, they planned to eject the weapons into space beyond the atmosphere and use the White Star's guns to destroy them where they could do no harm. Before departure the White Star would also use their guns to fuse the ground above the ruins, effectively creating a glass dome above them, preventing access to what lay below without actually destroying what was left of the buildings.

Matt explained, "As well as capping the ruins, we'll install motion detectors, so if anyone disturbs the ground within half a klick of the site, it will set off an alarm. Kirrin, you can take the alarm receiver with you when the White Star leaves."

Kirrin listened carefully to these plans and once she was sure she fully understood them, she agreed, but requested that a recording should be made of the destruction of the weapons, to be sent back to Eriadne so the Elders would have evidence that their wishes had been respected. Matt accepted this condition immediately and also offered to take one or more Elders on board the White Star to act as witnesses.

Kirrin's eyes lit up at this offer which she quickly accepted. She told us she'd never been in a spaceship before, having been born on Eriadne and never left, so this would be a wonderful new experience for her. Matthew smiled and said he was sure that they could make the event memorable for her. I suspected that a quick jaunt up into orbit and back down to the ruins might be deemed necessary, just to give Kirrin her first and possibly only ever view of Eriadne from space.

Bentley contacted his ship to make arrangements for the artifacts to be collected from the Elders' chamber, while Kirrin called the Brakiri guards to tell them what to expect. When all the arrangements had been made, Nisrina spoke up.

"What about us? What happens to our shuttle and all our work?"

Matt smiled at her and said, "The White Star is big enough to take your shuttle in its hold. I would strongly suggest that you hitch a lift now and Andy can take you back to Minbar. He'll contact IPX on the way to make sure they pick you up and take you home at their own cost. President DeLenn plans to have words with the Chief Executive of IPX about the way they've endangered their employees by effectively abandoning them. You might see some changes in employment practices in the not too distant future. DeLenn can be very persuasive."

That's an understatement. I'd never met the President of the ISA but I'd heard stories about her. My favorite was when she brought a fleet of Minbari warships to Babylon 5, which was being attacked by Earthforce ships, having just declared independence from the Earth Alliance. She had told the attacking ships, "Only one human captain has ever survived battle with a Minbari fleet. He is behind me; you are in front of me. If you value your lives, be somewhere else." Wisely, they retreated. I decided that I wouldn't want to be the Chief Executive of IPX when DeLenn decided to have 'words'.

Nisrina asked Hjalmar and Lowanna how they felt about leaving at this stage in their investigations. Hjalmar shrugged, "If they're going to glass over the ruins, there's not much more we can do anyway. And we can't be sure we won't get attacked again."

Kirrin interceded at this point with an assurance that there would be no repetition of the attack on the archeologists. "The Elders now know who was responsible for the sabotage that occurred during the days after your arrival. It will be made clear to all the colonists that you are in no way responsible. Your safety is guaranteed, but you are quite correct in saying that you will have no future access to the ruins."

Nisrina looked to Lowanna, who also shrugged and said, "We can't do any more here. We may as well go back to Minbar and wait to be picked up there. Although I don't know where we'll stay and we don't have any credits..." She tailed off, obviously embarrassed by the situation the archeologists found themselves in.

Matthew hurried to reassure her. "You can stay at the Rangers' compound for a few weeks at least. We have barracks empty at the moment, awaiting the next intake of trainees. They're not luxurious, but they're a damn sight better than that shuttle you've been living in. And Andy can make you comfortable enough on White Star 147 for the journey, can't you, Andy?"

Andy Bentley smiled at Lowanna and said, "We have a couple of spare cabins for guests. Your shuttle will be safe in the hold and you can stay in the cabins. It will take about three days to get back to Minbar, then we can drop you off at the compound and your shuttle can be held in the spaceport until you need it."



Nisrina sighed her relief at the proposals being made and gratefully accepted. That effectively ended the dinner party as our guests had to leave to prepare for the departure of White Star 147 and the tasks it needed to complete before it left.

The archeologists rushed up to their rooms to gather the few belongings they'd brought with them, and then rejoined us in the dining room. We all left together and walked down to the main gate where we said goodbye to the IPX team, Kirrin and Captain Bentley. Two Rangers were waiting to escort the archeologists back to their shuttle, while Kirrin and Andy walked across the turf outside the castle to where the White Star had settled. She was too big for the bays down at the spaceport, so the Rangers had brought her into land right next door to us.

Once they'd gone, Jack, Matt, Demon and I went back into the dining room for one last nightcap. Demon then suggested that we should go up to her rooms and watch the White Star leave from her terrace. The Brakiri helpers, who'd come back to the castle during the day, brought fresh linen for Demon's bed, and while we sat out on the terrace, looking up at the stars overhead, they quickly tidied up her rooms.

Yes, we could easily have done this ourselves and no, we don't expect to be waited on hand and foot when we stay at the castle. The problem is that if we try to do anything ourselves, we get hurt looks from the helpers and they ask if they're doing something wrong. It's easier to accept the help they want to give rather than fighting them constantly to do things ourselves. And we do express our thanks and gratitude to them frequently.

I watched my sister stretch out on a chaise longue big enough for two, and it was obvious she was glad to be back in her own rooms again. She looked like a cat who'd found a perfect spot to curl up in. Having her husband lying beside her, with his arm around her, just increased her contentment. Not that Jack and I were uncomfortable. We were lying on another sofa, Jack stretched out while I curled up against him. The night air was chilly so we had blankets covering us, making us feel even more cozy.

I cuddled up to my husband and stared up at the stars above us, spread across the sky like diamonds on black velvet. The comet we'd seen during our approach to the planet was still

emblazoned against the darkness, obscuring many of the stars in that part of the sky. None of the Earth constellations I'd grown up with were visible from Eriadne, but the Milky Way was still there, spanning the night sky like a river of milk. At times, I still have to pinch myself to believe that a girl from 20th century Earth had spent part of her life in a castle on a planet in a faraway part of the galaxy, before finally making a home aboard a spaceship.

We couldn't see the White Star from Demon's terrace, but we heard the shuttle arrive, and Matt stood to walk over to the surrounding wall, looking out to the east where the spaceship had landed. By standing on a bench positioned next to the wall, he could just see what was going on outside the castle. Demon remonstrated with him, saying he'd fall, but he quietened her, telling her he was fine.

I wish I could shut my sister up that easily. If I try it, she just goes on and on. And on.

Jack soon rose to join Matt, while Demon and I stayed snuggled up on the sofas. I stayed because I was warm and comfortable and I saw no reason to move. Demon probably stayed because she didn't want to get close to the edge. Her fear of heights hadn't improved with age.

Matt gave us a running commentary on the maneuvers necessary to get the shuttle into the White Star, which apparently was a tight fit. As the White Star's loading bay was at the rear of the ship, this led to some rather crude comparisons from both Gideons, with references to chickens being stuffed, and pelicans getting it in the ass. I have to admit that White Stars have always looked a bit like a chickens to me. Chickens with wings flapping around on each side. I did wonder why the Minbari, who designed the ships, hadn't made them look a little more elegant. But I suppose form follows function and there must be some good reason why they look the way they do.

And no, I'm not interested in finding out. My ignorance on this subject is blissful, thank you.

Once the shuttle was finally loaded there was a pause and then the quiet hum of the White Star engines coming on line. A gentle glow lit up the eastern battlements and the spaceship lifted gradually into view. The White Star still looked a bit like a skinned chicken, but the way it rose into the sky was beautiful and elegant. Slowly at first, then more and more quickly, the ship ascended, climbing into the starry sky until she became just one more pinprick of light above us, indistinguishable from the rest.

I smiled as I thought that Kirrin would be getting a fine view of the world below and if they went high enough, she might even get to see the sun illuminating the eastern edge of the planet with the brightness of the coming dawn.

Jack and Matt climbed down from the bench and came back to join us, pulling the blankets over themselves, which led to complaints and tussles from me and Demon. That led to a lot of kissing and snuggling, but we restrained ourselves from going any further, knowing that soon enough we'd be alone.

Matt's commlink crackled with a message, and he told us to look up and over to the right, where a blur of light was visible, rapidly increasing in brightness as the White Star descended. The outline of the ship became visible against the darkness and this time we all got off the sofas to watch as it hovered a few miles north east of our position.

A yellowish-green beam of light lashed out from the front of the spaceship. There was no sound, just a fierce light that played across the ground, turning it from darkness into a white glowing mass. Matt told us that the White Star was using its fusion cannon, the weakest of its weapons, to ensure that the ruins were not destroyed, but just sealed under the thick glass dome the light beam created.

After a few moments the beam of light winked out, the outline of the ship blurred and it came racing back towards the castle, landing out of sight between us and the town, presumably to drop Kirrin off. It wasn't long before the blue and white ship lifted almost silently above the battlements, then shot off into the night sky, again joining the other pinpricks of light above, until we could no longer see it.

Matthew received another message on his commlink and told us to wait a few moments then look into the sky to the north. Nothing happened for several moments then a bright white flash lit up the northern sky, drowning out the stars, then disappearing again in an instant.

With a nod of satisfaction Matt said, "That's all the Shadow weapons gone. We can call it a night now." He stood and held his hand out to Demon, pulling her to her feet and kissing her quickly. They were only just visible in the light that filtered out onto the terrace from the living room, but I could see them smiling at each other.

I wondered for a moment if Jack and I appeared so in love when we looked at each other. There was a time when I would have been jealous of my sister when her husband looks at her like that, but not anymore. Now the same face looks down at me with that same expression and I know I'm loved just as much as my sister.

Matt and Demon moved towards the doors then Matt looked back at Jack and me and said, "Are you coming?"

Jack held me tight against his side and called out, "We're OK here for a while if you don't mind?"

Matt shrugged in agreement then he and Demon disappeared inside. A second later the light from the living room was extinguished and the terrace was plunged into total darkness. The stars in the sky were brighter than ever when there was no residual light around us, and I lay for a moment, just staring up, glorying at the sight. Then Jack nuzzled my ear and said softly, "We haven't made love outside for a long, long time. I know it's cold, but can you think of a way we can keep warm?"

So we made love under the stars, and every so often, one of Demon's sendings swept over us, making it clear that we weren't the only ones having fun. It was dawn before we crept back inside, moving as quietly as possible so as not to disturb Matt and Demon, and made our way back to our rooms, where we fell into bed and finally slept.

30th September 2288

Jack and I had a long, languorous lie-in the next morning. We had a full day free before we planned to leave Eriadne, and the only thing that needed doing was Jack had to go down to Serenity in the afternoon to check on the unloading of goods we'd sold to the colonists and the loading of things



we'd bought. Jack told me that the trade we'd done, plus the sale of the copies of my birthday present, should make us a good profit on the trip.

I still hadn't mentioned Jack's plans to Demon, but I did wonder if my husband was being a little optimistic about Matt not having patented the design of the regenerator/vibrator. But knowing Jack, he probably didn't care that much about any patent and just planned to pirate the product and sell it in smaller markets where he was unlikely to get caught. My husband has never believed in playing by the rules. As he once said, "I'm not subtle, I'm not pretty, and I'll piss off a helluva lot of people along the way, but I'll get the job done." He didn't care that much about pissing Matt off.

But before Jack needed to leave for Serenity, we just stayed in our rooms and did what we liked to do best. No, not that. Well, not just that. Because of course we did that. We did that lots. But we also talked. We've always enjoyed lying in bed, holding each other and talking about our plans, where we would be going next, who we might be seeing, how G'Tan and No'Kar were doing on Angel's Rest, when we might consider adding another small ship to the fleet we were slowly building, and lots of other things, too.

By the time we dragged ourselves out of bed, breakfast was long over, but fortunately a buffet had been laid out for lunch, so we could just graze and help ourselves to whatever we fancied. We hadn't been eating for long when Matt and Demon walked in, obviously having decided to have a lazy day themselves. Once they'd helped themselves to food, Matt told us that he had reports to work on that afternoon, and asked Jack if he could come down to Serenity and use our Comms system to send them off. The system at the castle is rather old now and not very secure any more, while ours was bang up to date and safer than a bank vault.

So we agreed that the men would go down to Serenity while Demon and I took our postponed walk to the woods. It was lovely afternoon for a walk, sunny but not too hot and we both collected swimsuits from our rooms before we set out.

My sister and I spent the afternoon walking, swimming, talking and yes, dozing in the dappled shade of the trees that surrounded the pool. We talked about our mothers again, the impact the visits from the two different Galens had had on our husbands, and I decided to tell Demon about the other half-sister I'd learned about during my mother's visit.

I know I said I wouldn't tell her. She wheedled it out of me, OK? She can always tell when I'm hiding something from her. It's one of her most irritating qualities.

We speculated whether my other half-sister, named Lailah by my mother, would have had children of her own. It was likely that she too had been taken by the Shadows and impregnated with a daughter in her turn, as would each generation that came after, until the Shadows left the galaxy. So had some descendant of my other half-sister still been trapped in a Shadow ship until then?

Possibly, but there was no way to know. All we could be sure of was that the breeding programs instituted by both the Shadows and the Vorlons were finally at an end.

Demon and I made our way back to the castle as the late afternoon sun was moving into the west, feeling better for both the exercise and the naps we'd taken. We strolled into the main entrance hall, only to find Kullkarren sitting there, waiting for us. He leaped to his feet as we entered and bowed deeply.

My sister smiled at him and said, "You don't need to bow, Kullkarren. You'll be a Ranger soon and the Anla'Shok bow to no one."

Kullkarren broke into a wide smile at this reminder of his future and nodded. "Thank you, Lady Demon, or should I now call you Mrs. Gideon? How are you addressed by the Rangers?"

"Just Demon is fine, or Mrs. Gideon if we're being formal. But what can we do for you, Kullkarren? Why aren't you spending time with your family while you can?" Demon looked at him quizzically.

Kullkarren cleared his throat and swallowed, apparently nervous. "It's my family I've come to see you about. I know it's a lot to ask after what has happened. In fact, I think maybe it's too much to ask. I shouldn't have come... we shouldn't have come. Maybe we should just forget about it and go home. Yes, that's probably for the best..."

The young Brakiri was rambling so much he sounded a bit like Marcus Cole, and I couldn't help but smile as I thought of that other Ranger, but Demon held up her hand and stopped him. "Kullkarren, just spit it out. What can we do for you?"



He hummed and hawed a little longer then finally said, "My mother wants to speak to you. She's waiting in the library."

Demon's face froze. I knew she'd been desperately unhappy about Ranikir's refusal to see her or speak to her when we'd first arrived in Eriadne. Now our old friend Nikarran's daughter wanted to see her, just what could she expect from the meeting? No one else would have seen my sister's doubts but I know her better than most. She was nervous.

But Demon never avoids what she thinks is her duty, so she relaxed her face into a gentle smile and said, "Thank you, Kullkarren. I'll go and speak to her now."

She started to move away, when I put my hand on her arm and stopped her, saying, "I'm coming with you. No, don't say another word. This isn't a negotiation; I'm not compromising on this. I need to see Ranikir too, so I'm sticking right by your side. For once in your life, don't try to do the hard thing alone. Let me help. I need this just as much as you do."

Demon took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. And I'd very much like your support. Thank you."

I was so stunned that I nearly forgot to follow her as she walked away towards the library. With a quick wave at Kullkarren, I broke into a trot to keep up with her long-legged stride. OK, so maybe I lifted off the ground just a little bit and flew to catch up. My sister has much longer legs than me, and I hate having to trot to keep up with her.

I'm not going into detail about all the things that were said that afternoon in the library. I'll just say there were a lot of apologies and a whole lot of forgiveness going on. There were also lots of tears and yet again, I didn't have a hankie and Demon had to give me a tissue.

Just to hit the main points, Ranikir told us that she'd been visited by Nikarran on the Day of the Dead and he'd told her he was disappointed that she'd been so inflexible. He'd told her about the mission Demon had asked him to perform, and he'd told her how he'd died. It was good to be able to assure Ranikir that the men responsible for his death had been brought to justice and punished for their crime.

Demon begged Ranikir's forgiveness for having sent her father away to his death, and Ranikir begged Demon's forgiveness for having refused to listen to the story of her father's mission and sacrifice. I just dissolved into a puddle of tears and begged everyone's forgiveness for pretty much everything I'd ever done since the day I was born and everything I was going to do for the rest of my life.

That got me hugged from two sides and both my sister and Ranikir assured me that I wasn't in any way responsible for Nikarran's death and I should forgive myself. As if that's ever going to happen. But with that exception, we all ended up friends and happy with the way we'd resolved things between us.

Ranikir surprised us when she told us that she would miss her son terribly when he left to join the Rangers, but she knew he wouldn't be happy staying on Eriadne to become a farmer like his father. We'd both expected her to be angry and resistant to Kullkarren leaving Eriadne, but she was proud of her son and especially proud that he's been accepted by the Anla'Shok for training.

Demon promised that she and Matt would make sure he called his mother regularly and got assigned near enough to Eriadne to make frequent home visits. I felt a little sorry for Kullkarren as I think Demon planned to act as a surrogate mother to him on Minbar and I'm not entirely sure that's what a new Ranger trainee really needs. I decided to have a quiet word with Matt about it soon. I was sure he could persuade Demon to leave the poor boy alone and let him get on with spreading his wings without her hovering over him like a mother hen.

The sun had set long before we finished talking and accompanied Ranikir down to the castle gate, hugging her and saying our goodbyes, then watching as she walked down the hill back to the town, her son striding tall by her side.

I turned to my sister and said, "I'm glad she came. I think we both needed that."

Demon smiled and said, "I think you're right. And I'll tell you what else I need right now. I need my dinner!" My sister never forgets a meal.

We were laughing as we walked back into the castle and into the dining room where our husbands were waiting for us.

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It was late morning by the time we'd breakfasted, packed and got all our things down to Serenity—and yes, I did need several helpers to carry my bags. I'm not sure how so many of them had made their way up to the castle. I think they'd been breeding while my back was turned—ready for our departure. Kullkarren had already arrived and been shown to a cabin, and all the goods we'd bought had been loaded and stowed.



When we arrived at the spaceport I was delighted to see Kirrin and Thikira waiting with Ranikir to say goodbye to us. There were more hugs and tears but eventually everything that needed saying was said, and everything that needed doing was done, so Jack, Matt, Demon and I walked up the boarding ramp and after a brief pause to wave to the women below, we went inside and prepared ourselves for departure.

For me, that meant going up to the bridge as I'd told Jack I'd like to pilot Serenity off-planet. I took my seat at the pilot's station, ran all the pre-flight checks, made sure I was completely happy that we were ready for departure then lifted off. I took us up in a slow spiral, so I could watch the planet spinning below us as we left the atmosphere. I had no idea when I would return to Eriadne, but I was sure that one day I would, and any future visit would probably be just as eventful as every previous stay seemed to have been.

The journey back to Minbar was uneventful with one exception.

Matt and Demon had spent nearly all their time in their cabin, only emerging for meals. The rest of us were just grateful that the shielding held up and Demon's orgasmic projections were confined to their quarters. I'm sure there were times that I could feel the whole ship vibrating from their exertions. Or maybe it was from me and Jack doing much the same thing.

Anyway, Frank had to summon Matt to the Comm system on the third day of our voyage, telling him that he had a call from Eriadne. Matt went to the bridge to take the call and came back looking pensive. The rest of us were waiting for him in the dining room, eager to find out what it was about, but half-expecting to be disappointed by him saying it was classified. I swear he sometimes says that just to wind us up.

But for once, he was willing to share the news he'd just been given. "Branool's dead."

I gasped and put my hand to my lips, then felt my husband's arm go around my shoulders as he hugged me tightly to his side.

"What happened?" Demon had that frozen look she wears when she's hiding her feelings. Matt moved to her side and put his arm around her waist, steering her to a chair then waving the rest of us to join them.

"It seems Dagool isn't quite the idiot we all thought. He knew what would happen if he was found guilty and he wasn't willing to take the risk, so he offered a deal. He made a full confession, providing additional evidence to incriminate Branool, and he also provided details of Branool's contacts off-planet who were involved in the smuggling." Matt held up a data crystal and went on, "We've got enough to shut down the smuggling ring completely, which means that not only have we stopped the distribution of Shadow artifacts, but we'll be able to take out a major weapons trafficking operation. There are some people in very high places implicated in this, and not just on Brakir. This is a major success for the Rangers."

He was obviously delighted by this news, but he still hadn't explained what had happened to Branool, as Demon reminded him. "Oh, yes. When Branool was shown the evidence against him and the extent of Dagool's disclosures, he asked for some time to himself to consider his next steps. He probably had help from one of the guards, because the next morning he was found dead, having taken poison of some kind. Kirrin was sure he didn't have anything like that on him, so she's carrying out a full investigation to find out how he got hold of the stuff."

Demon looked doubtful. "Are they sure he took it willingly? He wasn't forced to take it, was he?"

Matt shook his head. "No one went near him the whole night. They had a video in his cell and they could see he poured a liquid into his water and drank it down all by himself. No outside intervention."

There was silence around the table for a moment and then Jack said, "I'm surprised Dagool had the intelligence to negotiate a deal of any kind. I always thought he was dumb. What did he get in exchange for his information?"

Matt explained that Dagool had several warrants outstanding on Brakir, but none for anything as serious as the crimes of which he was accused on Eriadne. "He asked to be extradited to Brakir and stand trial there. He's willing to plead guilty to the lesser charges and serve his time, in exchange for the charges on Eriadne being dropped. Kirrin decided that the information he was willing to trade was important enough to agree to his terms, so she did the deal. I'm delighted she did. This means that there's no risk of Branool and Dagool getting off without punishment for what they did, and no need for any of us to have to go back to Eriadne to give further evidence at the final hearing before the Elders."

I hadn't appreciated that we might have needed to do that, so I was relieved to hear it wouldn't be necessary. Jack and I had an itinerary planned and a trip back to Eriadne would have thrown our schedule into chaos.

Nevertheless, I think Matt was the only one of us who was truly happy at the way things had worked out. I knew that Branool would probably have ended up mind-wiped for his crimes, and this way, I didn't have to give evidence to bring that about, but a part of me still felt responsible.

My sister leaned across the table and rested her hand on mine. "Don't. You don't have to feel bad about this. Branool chose to steal the weapons. He chose to smuggle them off Eriadne regardless of the risk to anyone else. And he chose to kill himself rather than be mind-wiped. None of that is your fault. What you and Jack did has saved countless lives that might have been lost had those weapons got onto the black market. You did a good thing."

She was right of course, but dinner that night was still rather a subdued affair.

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