

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

by *The Space Witches*



Serenity

Chapter 2

September 2288

Jack Gideon

It was a cool autumn day at the Ranger compound on Minbar, but the afternoon was clear and sunny, so Demon and I had pulled on warm coats and gone to sit on the porch outside, me on the swing and Demon on a sofa opposite me, with Oscar curled up by her side. In an attempt to delay the conversation I knew was inevitable, I nodded at the dog and said, "I thought he wasn't allowed on the furniture."

The tall blonde smiled and replied as she fondled the dog's ears, "He's not. Or at least he's not when Matthew is around. Isn't it interesting that although you and Matthew are essentially identical, Oscar can tell the difference?"

I snorted in derision, "It's been a long time since Matt and I were the same person. Anyone can tell the difference these days."

That set me thinking as I sat on the porch of my doppelganger's house, rocking gently back and forth on his porch swing, looking at his wife and dog, wondering if he had any idea of just how lucky he was. Given the smug expression pasted all over his face during the time we'd spent together since our arrival earlier that day, and before he'd been hauled away to deal with some crisis or another, I suspected he did.

Bastard.

Yes, I know his parents were legally married, just like mine—in fact exactly like mine as at that time our universes hadn't diverged—but that doesn't stop him being a bastard. Just like me. Some descriptions are earned, not inherited.

But what made him particularly worthy of that epithet on that day was his obvious happiness with his lot. Then again, what was there not to be happy about? He was a galactic hero, with a challenging job that he loved, a beautiful wife he adored, two wonderful children, a dog who idolized him and he was obviously getting laid as often as he could ever have wanted. And getting laid by one of the two most beautiful, sexy women in the galaxy.

Bastard.

You might get the impression that I didn't like my doppelganger very much. You'd be right about that. But you might also get the impression that I wasn't very happy with my own life just then. You'd be right about that too.

And the beautiful woman—who was watching me intently, with her large, hazel eyes narrowed—knew exactly what I was feeling. She couldn't really help it, being an empath. But right then, I suspected she was making no effort to block my feelings. In fact, I think she'd opened her mind wide and was reading me like a book. A suspicion that was confirmed when she said, "Spit it out, Jack. What's the problem with you and Angel?"

I took a long time answering, but she waited patiently; in that respect, she's unlike her half-sister, my wife, Angelique. Just as in most physical aspects she's unlike Angelique.

I took in mysister-in-law's long legs, encased in tight black jeans, neatly tucked up beneath her curvaceous butt. Demon was taller and built on a larger scale than Angelique, but she still had a stunning body, with a narrow waist and full breasts that filled out the black t-shirt she was wearing under her coat. I felt a flare of lust as my eyes were drawn to the delicious cleavage so generously displayed and quickly suppressed it. I knew Demon would read that too. Not that she would ever react to my lascivious feelings. She was far too much in love with her husband to ever stray.

Bastard.

The silence between us grew longer until I finally sighed and leaned forward, bringing the swing to a halt. I put my head in my hands, knuckling eyes that burned through lack of sleep. I was aware that I didn't look my best. My hair was too long and unwashed, I hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and I had bags and shadows under my eyes. It probably didn't even take Demon's empathic skills to conclude that there was something seriously amiss. I looked a wreck.

I shook my head as I replied, "I wish I knew exactly how to answer that question, Demon, but the truth is that I don't really know or understand what's wrong. I'm just sure it's something I've done or said. I know it's my fault but I don't know why, so I don't know how to fix it. And Angelique just keeps telling me that nothing's wrong. But I know that's not true. I just wish she'd tell me what I've done so I could put it right. Or grovel abjectly until she forgives me. Whatever it takes."



I tried the puppy dog grin that had once worked well on softening my wife when I'd done something stupid, but which had ceased to be effective in recent weeks. Looking at Demon, I could see it wasn't working with her either. I'd obviously lost my touch where the women in that family were concerned.

Demon frowned, glaring at me with those large hazel eyes that could warm you to the core at times, or freeze you to death when she chose. Guess what the thermostat was reading just then? Let's just say that hell was in danger of freezing over.

"When did this all start, Jack? When did you do or say whatever it was that caused the problem?"

Well, that was just great. Demon obviously agreed that it was all my fault. Whatever it was. As if I wasn't worried enough already. My marriage seemed to be falling apart, my wife hadn't slept with me for weeks and now her sister was blaming me, too. I didn't need the extra pressure right then. But I swallowed my irritation and my pride, as I was sure that if anyone could help me find a way through this mess it was the cool blonde sitting opposite me. She'd helped me more than once in the past. I could only hope she would help me again.

I sat back in the swing chair and closed my eyes, thinking back over the previous weeks.

"It started when we moved on board Serenity. Everything was fine up to then. Angelique was really looking forward to us transferring to the new ship and she loved being able to name her. She even painted the name she chose on the hull. I teased her a little when she explained why she chose the name Serenity, but we laughed together about it and I thought we were going to be really happy living on board, just like we had on Angel's Rest. But once we started to move our things across to the new ship, everything just fell apart."

I concentrated on my memories of the move, which had seemed to be going smoothly, but when all our boxes arrived on board Serenity, my wife had changed.

"Angelique got really quiet and she never really moved into our new quarters. She commandeered another cabin that wasn't being used just then, the smallest room on the ship, and took Baby in there with her. She told me that she just wanted to enjoy sometime to herself for a while, that a little peace and quiet would be like a vacation for her. She's never moved out of that cabin since. And then there were the other problems."

I went on to explain the issues we'd had with the water recycling system which meant we hadn't been able to delight in the daily hot water shower we'd always enjoyed on the Angel's Rest. "But I'm sure it can't be just that. Angelique's not like that. She's used to vibe showers from her time on board Excalibur. She wouldn't sulk for weeks about a lack of hot water. There's something else going on, but she won't tell me what. Has she given you any idea?"

I looked hopefully at the tall blonde sitting on the sofa opposite me, but my hopes soon faded as she shook her head. "Angel hasn't been linking to me since you moved onto Serenity. The only contact I've had with her has been by Comm channel. Just a few brief recorded messages, keeping us up to date with your movements. I thought something might be wrong, and it was obvious from the way she went straight upstairs as soon as you arrived today that something was seriously amiss. Something much more than 'sulking' as you call it." That earned me another icy glare. At this rate I would turn blue before our conversation was done and not from the external temperature, cool though it was.

Demon took a deep breath then looked at me again with that frosty stare. "Did anything happen while you were moving her things into your new ship? Did you lose or break anything?"

I shook my head vehemently. "Not a chance. Angelique wrapped everything in so many layers of padding there was no chance of anything getting damaged. But then again, I wouldn't know if there was any harm done, as she just put most of her boxes into the hold and she hasn't opened them since. As far as I know, she just unpacked a few of her clothes into the cabin she's taken over, and she's left all the rest of her stuff untouched."

As I was speaking, I realized how strange this was. Angelique is a pack-rat. She likes to have things around her that make her feel good. I'd even joked about it when she was packing, laughing as I wondered how long it would take her to fill up our new, more spacious, rooms until they were as crammed as our old quarters on Angel's Rest. Now I thought about it, she'd gone rather quiet after that. Our new quarters were clean and clear of clutter. Just how I liked them—other than Angelique's absence—but maybe not so much how my wife preferred to live.

Oh shit.

I looked up to see that Demon was watching me carefully, that chilling frown still present on her beautiful face. "Angel didn't unpack? That's not right. Angel loves to have her things around her. What could have stopped her making herself at home?"

A shaft of guilt shot through me which was inevitably picked up by the empath sitting opposite me. Demon glared at me with renewed vigor. "Jack, what did you do? Or what did you say? Did you tell her you didn't want her stuff around?"

"No! I would never do that!" At least that was mostly the truth, which was a good thing as Demon can spot a lie a mile off. She can also spot a prevarication.

"You may not have said anything directly, but you must have said or done something. Or you wouldn't be feeling so guilty right now. Come on, Jack, confession is supposed to be good for the soul. Tell me."

For just a moment I decided I didn't envy my doppelganger being married to this woman after all. The prospect of never being able to get away with any kind of untruth or even avoidance was truly horrifying. I decided that the only thing I could do was to throw myself onto the mercy of the court.

I mumbled, "I may have made a joke about how much stuff Angelique had accumulated while we were on the Angel's Rest and wondered how long it would be before our new rooms on Serenity overflowed with her things." The look Demon gave me could have felled an ox. It certainly left me writhing with embarrassment and guilt. "It was a joke! I didn't really mean it. I love her stuff, really."

That was just pathetic. Now I was trying to lie to an empath. Will you never learn, Matt? Or Jack? Or whatever the hell my name is today. Sometimes I still forget who I am and the glare I was getting from Demon just then was enough to wipe anyone's memory clean.

"Jack, you are an idiot. A stupid, thoughtless, unfeeling, insensitive, clodhopping idiot. You have just stepped on the most delicate part of my sister's feelings with your giant, lead-lined, clumsy boots and you haven't a clue what you've done, have you?"

I'm not such an idiot that I don't know when to keep my mouth shut, so I just shook my head.

"Let me explain in words of one syllable, so that even a senseless, callous, unsympathetic, hard-hearted moron like you can understand."

So she did. And I deserved every adjective she'd used and a few more besides.

"You know how Angel spent her youth on Earth, don't you? Moving from one place to another with her mother, never really settling or having a home anywhere. You also know that she came to live with me when she was fifteen, but we only lived together on Earth for a couple of years before we were abducted by the Vorlons. The house in England was Angel's first home and she lost it when we were taken to Eriadne. We made a new home there after we were taken out of stasis, and Angel was happy again, but she lost her home again when Lucas Buck took her away with him." Demon's voice was icy as she almost spat out the name of the man who had done so much damage to the sisters' lives, particularly to Angelique. It almost felt good to know that there was someone in the galaxy who she hated even more than me just then.

She went on, "Angel tried to make herself a home with Lucas on Babylon 5, but she lost that when Lucas took her back to Eriadne with him, then she went to Mars with Nikarran, and lost her home there when he was killed. Angel's life has been full of lost homes and each time it's happened, she's had to start again. So the things she accumulates around her are important to her, because they define her home, rather than a particular place. Excalibur became her home for a while, but again, we left and moved to Earth, where she stayed with us until she married Michael and made a home with him. Then guess what? She lost all that again.

"I honestly don't know how she's managed to pick herself up so many times, but somehow she has. So we won't even mention the home she lost when she left Lucas and her baby behind. Then you came back and took her to Angel's Rest and finally, she was happy for the first time in many years. She had a home at last. So being Angel, she filled it with things that are important to her, things that give her good feelings and happy memories. Moving out of that ship was a really big deal for

her, Jack. It was really scary. But she didn't want you to worry, so she hid her fears and got on with it.



"She's gotten very good at hiding her feelings. I guess she had to when she was living with Lucas, but Angel would have been really scared, Jack. Scared of having to start all over. And then you come along and tell her that all thing things she's accumulated to help her ward off those fears are silly and annoying. And because she loves you, she felt she had to put away all her silly, annoying things. But it made her so unhappy that she's hidden herself away, curling up in a small space like a wounded animal, and you, you blithering idiot, couldn't even figure out what you'd done!"

Those hazel eyes were spitting icicles at me now, and I wanted to duck behind the swing bench for cover. She's a big lady, OK? She could do a lot of

damage if she chose.

But she was right, of course. I'd been monumentally stupid and deserved every insult she could throw at me. I'd nearly wrecked my marriage through being thoughtless and inconsiderate. My only hope now was that Demon could help me make it better somehow. So I summoned up my weakest, most pathetic little smile and asked, "So how do I fix this? How do I let her know that I've been an ass and that I didn't mean to make her feel bad?"

Demon leaned back in her seat and sighed, stroking Oscar's ears as she said, "I think I'll need to do a little groundwork for you. I'll explain that living with a Gideon requires endless patience and tolerance of stupidity. Then maybe if you grovel long enough and hard enough, she just might forgive you."

Her face softened as she smiled at me, "You're incredibly lucky, you know? You and Matt are both very fortunate that your wives love you so much that we'll forgive you pretty much anything if you're truly sorry. So when you apologize, buster, you'd better make it good!"

My only consolation was the thought that Matt was just as bad as me.

Bastard.

I was sitting at the kitchen counter, drinking coffee and going over the delivery schedules for the goods I'd be picking up while we were on Minbar when Matt arrived home that evening. He paused to pat Oscar, who'd risen from his basket, tail wagging furiously as my doppelganger came through the door.

"Where are Deborah and Angel?" he frowned at me as he continued to pet the dog. I nodded at the note that lay on the counter in front of me and took another sip of coffee as he reached to open the envelope.

It was one of those archaic practices that Demon still clung to: handwritten notes, on paper no less. She could have sent Matt a message to his data-pad, but no, she preferred to leave him a note in her neat, rounded handwriting.

Matt frowned as he read then looked up at me. "She says I should take you down to the Rangers' refectory for dinner." I nodded again. That much Demon had told me before she'd gone upstairs to the bedroom where my wife had remained since we'd arrived.

"Why?" I could see Matt was getting irritated with my silence and I was tempted to keep my mouth shut and just shrug an answer. But that would have been petty. Childish even.

So I shrugged and remained silent, sipping my coffee slowly so the mug didn't empty, thereby giving me an excuse for keeping my face mostly hidden. I was enjoying Matt's annoyance way too much and didn't want to show my entertainment. As I said: petty and childish.

Matt has that effect on me.

He shook his head and gave an exaggerated sigh, then said, "OK, get your coat before you talk me to death. Let's go."

I stood slowly and took my time over finishing my coffee, just to annoy him a little more, then grabbed my coat from where it lay on a stool next to me. I didn't put it on until we left the house and then I was glad of it.

The air had become chilled as night had fallen. Winter was well on its way in that part of Minbar and I could see my breath in front of me in the frigid air as we walked. Matt strode straight past his motorbike, which was parked in front of the house, and started walking towards the main Ranger compound. I knew that he usually took his bike for that short ride, but he obviously didn't want to ride with me. I couldn't blame him. I wouldn't have welcomed the close proximity that riding pillion on the bike would have required.

There was something deeply uncomfortable about the thought of actually touching this other person who had once been me. This was why Matt and I rarely shook hands. I'm sure there's some suitably obscure psychological term for our distaste for each other, but frankly, I don't give a damn. Matt and I just don't like each other very much but we tolerate each other for our wives' sake.

We walked in silence through the Rangers' compound, which in daytime gives a beautiful display of plantings and buildings. Paths wind between and around vegetation and arbors, trees and shrubs creating wonderful spaces for groups of Rangers to train and learn, as well as smaller spaces for quiet contemplation and meditation. At night, in autumn, the lighting created a sparkling wonderland; nearly bare branches were threaded with small white lights and larger globes illuminated the paths.

Had I been in a better mood and with better company, the walk to the refectory would have been delightful. As it was, I was only delighted when we arrived and entered the large, warm room, where a number of Rangers sat in small groups, eating and talking quietly amongst themselves, creating a cheerful yet tranquil atmosphere.

My mood lifted a little when a Ranger stood and approached us, smiling. I recognized the human form of my 'nephew', Vya, immediately. The general appearance he showed outwardly could vary—he's a shapeshifter—but the bright blue eyes he'd inherited from his father, Max Eilerson, remained the same whatever form he took. Of course, he isn't my biological nephew. His mother, Ilas, was an alien from a race that was unknown before a small group of survivors had been found on the planet Nabula a few years before.

Ilas had been one of the 'witches' the Vorlons had abducted and taken to Eriadne to train to become a weapon in their great war with the Shadows, along with her 'sisters': my wife Angelique, Matt's wife, Demon and the fourth sister, Lily who had hand-fastened with the Excalibur's then First Officer, John Matheson. The four women had considered themselves sisters even though only Demon and Angelique were genetically related.



Vya shared his mother's shapeshifting ability and her species' rapid growth and aging, so had become a Ranger several years before even though he was now only around eighteen Earth years old. The Rangers were his family, as he'd lost his parents in the skies above Nabula and his sister had died soon thereafter, from a sickness that had been picked up by several of us—including me and Matt—after our exposure to fungal spores on the planet. It's fair to say that Nabula was not one of Vya's favorite places, despite his finding the few remaining members of his mother's species there.

Vya strode forward and gave me a tight hug. "Uncle Jack. It's good to see you again."

I smiled and said, "You too, Vya." But I couldn't help remembering the last time we'd met, when we'd built the memorial cairn for Vya's sister, Ilori and her parents, Max, Ilas, and Dureena, on the hill above Matt and Demon's home on Earth.

The ascent of that hill had been a struggle for all of us who'd been affected by the disease that had killed Ilori. I'd needed the support of both my wife and Matt's son, Marcus to make that climb. But I'd made it up there in the end and laid a stone in memory of my favorite thief and the annoying Xenoarcheologist who had joined my mission to find a cure for the Drakh plague and had died in the attempt. The people we were remembering on that day four years earlier may not have been my Dureena and Max, but it was the only chance I got to help create a memorial to them.

Matt butted in on my reunion with Vya, asking, "Have you eaten yet, Vya? Will you join us?" I could tell that Matt was as reluctant to have a tête-à-tête with me as I was with him. A third party—any third party—would be welcomed by both of us.

Vya said, "I've just finished, Entil'Zha, but I'd be delighted to join you and Uncle Jack if you would allow me." He gave one of those Minbari bows, with hands held in front of him and fingers forming a triangle. I still have no idea why the Minbari and the Rangers do that.

Matt responded enthusiastically, grinning as he said, "I'm not sure about 'allow', Vya, but if you have the time, I'll insist."

Vya bowed again but smiled and led us to an empty table, then waited for us to sit before joining us. The refectory appeared to be self-service with a long counter displaying a variety of food, but when I went to stand to choose and collect my dinner, Vya waved me back into my seat.

"Please, Uncle Jack. Allow us to have the honor of serving you. The Entil'Zha usually insists on serving himself when he joins us here, but as you're his guest, I'm hoping that just this once he'll make an exception." He gave a shy grin as he looked at Matt.

Matt laughed and said, "OK, just this once, as we have a guest." I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Matt wasn't usually that polite to me—or about me for that matter. He went on, "What's on the menu tonight?"

The Minbari Ranger who'd silently materialized alongside our table gave one of those bows and said, "The cooks would be happy to provide whatever the Entil'Zha and his guest desire."

I was tempted to see just how exotic the Ranger's supplies could get, but decided that annoying Matt was less important than returning the courtesy being shown to me by the Rangers. So I ordered a rare steak, fries and a salad, which was something I could see several of the human Rangers at other tables eating.

Matt nodded his agreement, just saying, "Make that two, and could you bring us a jug of fruit juice? Thanks, Clarenn."

I wondered if Matt knew the name of every Ranger in the room then told myself that of course he did. I'd always made a point of knowing the names of every person under my command, so why would Matt be different? He was another version of me, after all.

I also wondered about the order for juice, then remembered that the Minbari were violently allergic to alcohol—those who consume even a small amount suffer from sudden and extreme psychotic impulses accompanied by ferocious, homicidal rages. This is generally something to be avoided at mealtimes, so it was hardly surprising that the refectory was alcohol-free. Fortunately, Matt didn't carry that rule over into his own home. I was looking forward to raiding his private bar before turning in for the night.

While we waited for our food, Vya asked, "Where is Harry, Uncle Jack? He's still crewing for you, isn't he?"

It was interesting that he didn't ask about Demon or Angelique. I guess he assumed they were doing 'sister stuff' together back at the house. Well, he wasn't wrong. I smiled and replied, "Yes, he's still with us. When No'Kar and G'Tan took over the Angel's Rest, we asked if he wanted to go with them, but he preferred to stay with me and Angelique. Well, actually I think he wanted to stay with Baby. He adores that dog."

Harry had befriended Angelique when she'd lived with Lucas Buck and he'd followed her after she ran away, bringing her beagle puppy, Baby, with him. Both now lived with us onboard Serenity.

Harry had been invited to join us at Matt and Demon's house but he's an introverted guy and preferred to stay on the ship. Looking after Baby gave him the excuse he needed. I heard Matt mutter something about Harry being more keen on the dog than he was on me but I decided to ignore that.

I asked Vya what he was doing on Minbar and whether he was permanently stationed there now, and after a quick glance at his boss for permission, Vya launched into a description of his duties that lasted until our food arrived. He carried on talking while Matt and I ate, allowing us to concentrate on clearing our plates of the excellent food provided.

When we'd finished, Clarenn brought fruit and a selection of crackers and cheeses to our table, along with a large pot of coffee which Matt and I proceeded to demolish. With the amount of coffee I'd drunk that day I knew I was in for a sleepless night, but I didn't care. I hadn't slept well for weeks so one more night would make no difference. And I knew if Demon did her magic on her sister, there was a chance that I might not be sleeping alone for the first time in weeks. That was definitely worth staying awake for.

Vya kept us entertained with stories of his adventures and his current job—which seemed to involve drilling particularly inept Ranger trainees in the art of infiltration and deception, with hilarious consequences—until Matt and I had finished our meal. Then he stood and bowed again, saying, "It has been wonderful to see you, Uncle Jack. I hope you have an entertaining but uneventful trip."

As Vya left the room I looked over at Matt with eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Did you arrange that?"

Matt tried to look innocent. "Arrange what?"

"For Vya to join us and talk non-stop so that we wouldn't have to talk to each other."

Matt shrugged. It's a really annoying gesture. And I don't want to hear anything about pots and kettles.

"When did I get a chance to do that?" It was a good point but I didn't believe him. He had a Comm bracelet on his wrist and it would be entirely in character for him to have some sort of touch-based system programmed in for him to send silent messages. That's what I'd do. I made a mental note to have my Comm bracelet upgraded.

I ignored his comment, stood and pulled my coat back on, then walked to the door of the refectory, pausing only to thank Clarenn for his service, as well as asking him to pass my thanks to the cooks for the excellent food we'd been given. The Minbari did one of those bows again, blushing with pleasure at the compliment. I didn't know that Minbari could blush, did you? Maybe it's a worker caste thing, as most Minbari I'd met before then had been Warrior or Religious caste. Don't get me started on Minbari Warriors. No really. We could be here all night.

The delay gave Matt time to catch up with me, and we left together, striding back up the hill towards the Entil'Zha's residence. Matt kept his silence until we were back inside, then nodded towards the sitting room, saying, "Nightcap?" Part of me wanted to refuse and go straight up the bedroom Demon had told me I could use that night, but I knew I'd drunk way too much coffee to be able to sleep.

So I nodded my agreement and followed Matt into the living room knowing that I was about to be subjected to an interrogation, and deciding I may as well get it over with as long as I could drink some of Matt's best Scotch at the same time.



"You're a fucking idiot, you know that?" Matt wasn't looking at me as he said this. He was standing looking into the flames of the fire he'd lit when we'd got back, while leaning on the mantle, nursing a heavy crystal glass that still held the finger of Scotch he'd poured for himself earlier. I was on my third measure.

I snorted and replied, "Your record on saying and doing stupid things where the sisters are concerned isn't perfect, Matt, is it? You're hardly in a position to criticize."

Matt turned and looked at me with narrowed eyes as I continued, "Your wife walked out on your wedding, didn't she? After she knocked you unconscious."

I could have sworn that for a moment a flash of relief crossed Matt's face and I wondered what I'd missed. Was there something else Matt had said or done that he would prefer I didn't know about? Interesting, and something to be considered for further investigation at a later date. But just then we had more important issues to discuss.

I hadn't had much choice about explaining the problems Angelique and I were having to Matt. I knew that Demon could keep secrets from her husband if she wanted to—after all, she'd kept him in the dark about my whereabouts and her regular contacts with me for over six years after my arrival in this universe and my escape from the Excalibur—but I also knew that she hated doing so and that she wouldn't outright lie to her husband for me or for anyone else. So rather than put my sister-in-law in an untenable position, I told Matt what an idiot I'd been.

Much to my surprise, my doppelganger restricted himself to the one insult, then walked over and refilled my empty glass before seating himself on a chair opposite me. He took a small sip from his own glass then looked at me and grinned, "Living with these women isn't always easy, is it? I got lucky. Deborah likes things pretty much the same way I do." He waved at the comfortable but uncluttered living room we were sitting in. "But it seems a bit of an over-reaction for Angel to shut herself off for weeks just because you joked about her having too much stuff. Are you sure that's all you said?"

I shook my head and said, "Hand on heart, Matt, that was it. I just made a joke. Or maybe two or three jokes." I hung my head, feeling a little ashamed of myself at last. Maybe, in hindsight, I had gone on a bit. Or quite a lot.

Matt sighed. "I suppose Angel didn't think it was funny. Which I guess isn't that surprising. She's been wrenched away from every home she's ever had before the Angel's Rest. And just when she was feeling good about making a new home with you onboard Serenity, you effectively told her you didn't like the way she made herself comfortable. You might just as well have trashed all the things that are so precious to her, the things that hold her memories and make her feel happy."

Which pretty much summed up what Demon had told me earlier. It really pissed me off that Matt had such an insight into my wife's character and I didn't. I tried to tell myself that he'd known her for much longer than I had, but that was a pathetic excuse. I'd just been the dumb, insensitive idiot that Demon had described so well earlier. Guilty as charged.

Matt looked up at me and said, "I suppose Deborah is now trying to persuade her sister that as she married an idiot like you, she has to live with the consequences and the best way of getting her own back now is to unpack all her things and create as much clutter as she likes on Serenity. And I guess you're just going to have to live with that."

I groaned quietly and pushed away the thought of how much I'd enjoyed having our rooms so clear of mess over the previous few weeks. A little clutter was a small price to pay for having Angelique back in my bed and my arms. Or even a lot of clutter. Hell, at that point I didn't care if I suffocated under a pile of pillows and cushions, as long as I did it with Angelique by my side.

Matt then grinned across at me. "Deborah had better get this sorted tonight or I'll never forgive you for causing her absence from my bed. I haven't slept alone since we arrived on Minbar and I don't want it to happen now, you hear me?"

I smiled back and snorted, "Well, excuse me for interfering with your sex life, Entil'Zha. I'll make sure that everyone in the compound knows that it's my fault you didn't get laid tonight and that you're in a bad mood tomorrow. Just this once you'll have to make do with self-service."

Matt laughed and stood, holding his hand out to steady me as I tried to emulate him and wobbled a little from the effects of all the Scotch I'd consumed. As I said, Matt and I don't like touching each other, but just then I appreciated his support. At that moment, I think I liked my doppelganger more than at any other time since we met.

I knew it wouldn't last of course. By the following morning, when I was hungover and he was sexually frustrated from not having screwed his wife into the mattress, I knew we would be back to cordially detesting each other.

But just then, the warm glow left by the good Scotch created an aura of fellowship and we parted for the night on good terms for once.

Angelique crept into my bed early the following morning, just as dawn was breaking. I was hungover, with a pounding headache and a mouth like the bottom of a birdcage, but I didn't care. I rolled over, holding my arm out so she could nestle alongside me. We didn't make love; it was too soon for that. But we held each other and I told her how sorry I was and how insensitive I was and how I'd never do anything so stupid again and if I did she had my permission to hit me. Hard.

When I'd groveled enough, she eventually told me she'd forgiven me for hurting her feelings so badly.

Angelique was back in my bed and in my life.

I have no idea what Demon had said to my wife; no idea what had taken place between them during that long night. Angelique never spoke about it and Demon was equally tight-lipped. I wondered if my sister-in-law ever confided in her husband but somehow I doubted it. What had

happened and what had been said was between the sisters and it remained between them and no-one else. It's possible they confided in Lily, but if they did, I never found out about it.

None of that was important. I had my wife back in my arms and she was talking to me again. We had a long road ahead, but all we really needed was time. In time, I'd be able to make Angelique happy again.

Angelique and I went down for breakfast after we'd taken full advantage of the copious, steaming hot water available at the Entil'Zha's residence. I'd designed Serenity with extra-large water tanks that were supposed to enable us to have baths and showers, but the glitches in Serenity's recycling systems had prevented us from using our water supplies for anything other than cooking and drinking for several weeks before our arrival on Minbar. I'd hated vibe showers ever since I entered Earthforce and nothing had happened during the intervening decades to make me change my mind. But now, clean and fresh, with my wife's hand held tightly in mine, I went down to breakfast feeling better than I had in weeks, despite the nagging remains of my hangover.

Matt and Demon greeted us quietly as we entered the kitchen and Demon came over to give both of us a brief hug, then turned to put bread in the toaster, asking if we wanted eggs and if so, how we would like them cooked. Matt poured us both coffee, then pointed to the jug of juice on the counter, telling us to help ourselves.

The atmosphere over breakfast was subdued but generally cheerful as we spoke of our plans for the day. Matt had some work to finish up before he left on vacation, while Demon said she needed to take Oscar down to Marcus Cole's house, where he, Susan and Talia would be caring for the dog during our absence.

Demon smiled as she said, "Marcus loves looking after Oscar. They really are two of a kind. Both of them are hairy, boisterous, over-active and big hearted." She looked down fondly at the dog as he sat at her side, moving his head against her hand as she rubbed his ears.

Angelique gave a quiet chuckle which filled me with happiness as she said softly, "I'm sure if you offered to tickle Marcus' tummy like you do Oscar's, he'd roll over on his back for you, too."

Matt laughed and pulled his wife to his side, saying softly, "Don't even think about it. There's only one tummy getting tickled around here and I don't mean the dog's."

Demon smiled and detached herself from Matt's embrace, asking, "What are your plans for today, Jack?"

I told her I needed to supervise the delivery of the goods I'd ordered and to make Serenity ready for departure the following day. I looked across at Matt and asked him, "Are you still on schedule for leaving early tomorrow morning?"

Matt nodded. "As long as I can get a full day's work in today, that should be fine. So I'd better get started." He stood, poured himself another mug of coffee, kissed his wife and left the kitchen.

Demon smiled again as she watched him leave then turned to her sister. "Do you want to come down to see Marcus with me, Angel? I know how much he'd like to see you while you're here."

*I turned to my wife and smiled.
"That's a great idea, Angelique.
I'll be tied up on Serenity with
Harry for most of the day. You
could collect Baby and take him
for a walk over to Marcus'
house."*



*I knew how much my wife liked
Marcus Cole. She'd been
responsible for reviving him from
cold storage—long story—many years before and they'd been like brother and sister to each other ever
since. Marcus Cole was one of the few men in the galaxy who I trusted with my wife's well-being. I
knew his feelings for her were entirely fraternal. His two wives didn't leave him with the energy for
anything else.*

*Angelique agreed to our plans, so we left the Entil'Zha's residence to make our way down to Serenity.
As we walked along the path to the Spaceport I mused on the fact that I hadn't told Matt exact
details of the problems with Serenity's recycling plant. He didn't yet know that he'd have to use vibe
showers for the journey to and from Eriadne.*

*I felt a wide grinspreading across my face at the thought of Matt's reaction when he found out,
which I would make sure happened well after our departure from Minbar. Life was definitely getting
better.*

[{Chapter 1}](#) [{Chapter 2}](#) [{Chapter 3}](#) [{Chapter 4}](#) [{Chapter 5}](#)

Homecoming

[{Section 1}](#) [{Section 2: The Day of the Dead}](#) [{Section 3}](#)

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

[{Part 1: Serenity}](#) [{Part 2: Homecoming}](#) [{Part 3: A Winter's Tale}](#) [{Part 4: Darkness Descends}](#)