

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

by *The Space Witches*



Angel

Chapter 4

23rd September 2288

Angelique Denier-Gideon

Jack and I left the spaceport behind us and walked through the town hand in hand, with Matthew and Demon walking alongside us. It was very quiet, with few of the townspeople out and about at that hour. Although the sun had been up for a while, and the farmers would have left to tend the fields earlier, most other Brakiri were still asleep. They had once been a nocturnal species, and although they had adapted to living in daylight for millennia—since becoming farmers rather than the night hunters they had once been—they still preferred to sleep late in the morning and stay up late at night. They were very much people after my own heart!

So only a few shops were unshuttered and the streets were quiet as we made our way to the castle above us, each carrying a bag with the things we needed for our stay. Well, some of them anyway. I would need to either go back to the ship for more clothes later or ask someone to bring them up to

the castle for me. We planned to stay for several days so there was no way that one small bag would carry everything I needed.

I sometimes envy my older sister her simple taste in clothes and accessories. Demon can pack a bag for a week in 5 minutes flat and carry it herself with ease. It takes me hours to pack even for an overnight stay and I basically need at least one bag per night that I'm away from home. Please don't ask me why I need so many things when staying away, I just do! OK, I have a thing about having stuff around me, which is what led to my recent problems with Jack. I like stuff. I'm not a hoarder, honestly, but I will admit to being a bit of a pack rat. Just a bit.

And it should be obvious that packing is easy if you only ever wear one color. No wonder Demon travels light; wearing only black, she looks really boring. So I have a duty to uphold the family's fashion honor by wearing lots of different outfits, all in contrasting colors—OK, mostly red—and all sexy enough to keep my husband's attention firmly where it belongs. That takes thought, planning and a lot of luggage, so there.

Anyway, I carried my single—rather heavy—bag over my shoulder, glad that I could use my telekinesis to help lighten the load. I wondered where I might find someone to carry up the remainder of my luggage from the ship to the castle later. Would there still be Brakiri working at the castle who were willing to help out? If not, I'd have to ask Harry to help out.

We'd left Harry on Serenity, looking after Baby, and Ana Clara, Frank and Shukar had decided to stay with them. We'd offered them rooms at the castle, but they'd told us they'd prefer to use the ship as a base for exploring the town.

I suspected that Shukar would spend most of his time on board as he rarely ventured off the ship unless he absolutely had to. He wasn't a typical Drazi, as he seemed to hate the outdoors and nature in general. He loved his engines and his weapons and would take every opportunity to stay on the ship working on them, making sure they were in perfect condition. That made him a real asset on our crew.

I knew that Frank and Ana Clara would get out and about, seeing the few sights there were to be seen and shopping for whatever local souvenirs might be available. I'd cautioned them that the Brakiri colonists weren't really set up to support tourists, but I knew they'd be happy exploring together and venturing out of town into the countryside beyond. I'd given them some stern warnings about the dangerous local wildlife, and in particular the venomous Avians that had killed Harry's brother years before.

So it was just me, my sister and our husbands who made our way quietly through the winding streets in the early morning light, gradually climbing the hill towards the castle above.



As I looked up at it looming above us, I shivered. There were so many memories woven into the fabric of this place. Some were good, but many were bad. From the torture and punishments to which the Vorlons had subjected my sisters and me, to Lucas Buck and all the dreadful things he'd done, and finally, to Galen and his attack on us up at the Carillon Gap, some very bad things had happened to me and my family on Eriadne.

So why did I keep on coming back to this planet? What was it that drew me like a fish caught on a hook, hurting, but powerless to resist the pull of the place? Perhaps it was the memories of the happy times, the period after we'd been woken from stasis, when my sisters and I had lived happily together in the castle, working in harmony with the villagers. I'd been a healer then, and I'd loved helping the Brakiri, making their harsh lives more bearable. Those had been happy years, before the Excalibur arrived and changed our lives forever.

And then there were the places I loved, like the library and the pool in the woods and the orchard, where I could be alone with a book and lose myself completely. Or my rooms where I could work on my Grimoire, or use my balls of sight to have fun watching what went on in and around the castle. I'd first learned how to use 'spells' from the books in the library, working with Lily on developing our 'magic' which was really just an extension of the powers the Vorlons had brought out in us. But it was using such a spell that had led to Lucas Buck being set free from the Apocalypse Box, and all the death and destruction that had followed. I rarely used my 'magical' powers any more. There was too much risk of damage and destruction ensuing.

But I had been young and careless in those days, and hadn't thought about the consequences of my actions. I look back on the girl I was then and wonder how I could have been so naïve. Life had taught me, painful lesson by painful lesson, to be more cautious.

All these thoughts raced through my mind as I held Jack's hand tightly and walked the streets that had changed so much since I had lived on Eriadne. I couldn't help but wonder what further lessons awaited me in this place.

As we crossed the drawbridge into the inner court of the castle, we could see a group of three Brakiri waiting for us on the lawns. I smiled as I recognized the two women in the group, despite how much they'd changed over the years that had passed since we'd last met. The older woman stepped forward and held out her hands in greeting.

"Kirrin," I said softly as I reached out to hug her. Kirrin had been my sister Lily's closest friend in the village and while her hair was now completely grey and her face was lined with age, her body was still slim and strong, and her personality as vibrant and cheerful as ever.

"Lady Angel," she replied as she returned my hug and looked over my shoulder at my sister. "And Lady Demon, too. It is so good to see you both again. And your husbands." She released me from her arms then stood back to look from Jack to Matt and back again. "Although I have no idea how we are going to tell your husbands apart." She looked back at me and grinned naughtily. "Do you ever get mixed up and find yourself in bed with the wrong one?"

That made me blush a little as I remembered all too well how often I'd fallen into Matt's bed in the past, but not since Jack had come back into my life.

Jack stepped forward and put his arm around me, saying, "Our wives might get confused but Matt and I know exactly which witch is which."

That made us all laugh and Kirrin stepped back and gestured to the other woman. "You remember my daughter, Thikira?"

The tall, elegant woman had stood quietly at her mother's side as we'd spoken but she now smiled at us all and nodded. I laughed and said, "How could I ever forget Thikira? I seemed to spend half my life patching up the bumps and bruises she inflicted on herself climbing every tree within a day's walk from the castle, and falling out of a few, too!"

Thikira laughed and replied, "I wish you were still around to care for my daughter's injuries, as she seems determined to climb as many trees as I did, and to fall out of even more of them." We hugged each other warmly, and then she also stood back and Kirrin gestured for the last person in the group to step forward.

"And this is the young man you have all come to meet. This is Kullkarren, who is so eager to leave Eriadne, and wants to become a Ranger." She looked over at Matt—I noticed that despite what she'd said, she seemed to have no difficulty telling the Gideons apart—and smiled. "And I believe that you now lead the Rangers in protecting us all, and it is you who will decide whether this boy is allowed to follow his dreams."



Matt nodded. "We have a few things we need to check out, but if this young man is anything like his grandfather, I'm sure he'll be joining us on Minbar soon enough."

There was a pause after Matt had spoken, during which some of us remembered Nikarran, Kullkarren's grandfather, who had died on Mars so many years earlier. Before the silence could become too awkward, Kirrin spoke again. "Please, come into the dining room. We have breakfast waiting for you, and then you can decide which rooms you want to stay in. Everything is ready for you, and I will be staying in the castle for as long as you need me, to supervise the staff and ensure that you have everything you require."

We followed her through the main door, protesting that we could easily take care of ourselves and we didn't want her to inconvenience herself or anyone else during our stay, but she brushed our protests aside. "You shared all the wonderful things this castle held when our colony was struggling to survive. Without your help, our lives would have been much harder and many of us would have sickened and died. Some of us remember that, and we will always be grateful. Allow us to express that gratitude by showing you our hospitality."

When she put it like that we could hardly refuse. So we went to the dining room with Kirrin, Thikira and Kullkarren and they joined us for our second breakfast of the day. Matt and Jack did the food rather more justice than Demon and I managed, but we all ate enough to show our appreciation.

When we'd finished, Matt sat back and loosened his belt a little, smiling at Kirrin, who sat opposite him. "That was wonderful, Kirrin, thank you. I have very fond memories of the meals that

we enjoyed here in the castle on previous visits, but I have even fonder memories of the endless supply of hot water. Having only had access to a vibe shower during our journey here, I'm desperate for a good wallow in a hot tub. Would you mind very much if we retired to our rooms now?"

I stared at Matt in open mouthed astonishment. When did he learn to be such a diplomat? Had Demon finally taught him some manners? The Matt I'd known years before would have just stood up and said, "I need a bath, show me where I can find one."

I looked at my husband and he seemed as surprised as me. I nearly giggled at his expression, but pulled myself together as Kirrin turned to me and said, "We were not sure which rooms you would like to stay in, Lady Angel, so we have prepared both your old rooms and the suite you occupied at the time of your wedding. Which would you prefer?"

Now that was a very good question. I had loved my rooms when I lived on Eriadne, but some very bad things had happened there and perhaps it would be better to go somewhere that only held happy memories. I bit my lip, trying to decide, when I felt my husband's arm settle around my shoulders.

Jack leaned in to whisper in my ear, "Maybe it's time to face your fears, Angelique. Let's go see your old quarters, and then if it's too much, we can always move on."

I took a deep breath and smiled up at him. This is why I love Jack so much. He'd noticed my hesitation and immediately knew what caused it. He gives me support when I need it, he gives me love and he gives me happiness. How could I not love him? How could I have been so stupid as to think he didn't love me anymore and shut myself away from him for weeks? Well, I wasn't going to repeat that mistake. I planned to spend the whole time we were on Eriadne glued to his side.

When I wasn't on top of him or underneath him, of course.

Demon and Matt left arm in arm to make their way to my sister's rooms, while Jack and I climbed the stairs and followed the corridors that led to my old quarters. When we arrived at the door, I took a deep breath then reached out to open it. It swung silently on its hinges to reveal a view that instantly took me back twenty years.

The large four poster bed was still covered in a beautiful red velvet throw. Cushions of varying fabrics and colors were piled high at the head of the bed and on the sofa and chairs. The curtains were thick and heavy, made from deep ruby red velvet that blocked all light when they were drawn. The doors to my spell room and bathroom were both a little ajar, but both were internal rooms, so the only light came through the large windows that looked out over the fields that surrounded the castle.



Everything looked just the same as when I'd lived here, except for the tapestry that used to hang above my bed, which was now hanging from the bulkhead in our quarters on Serenity. Only one thing made the room look unfamiliar.

It was tidy.

It had never been so tidy when I'd lived here. I smiled as I remembered how often Demon used to yell at me to clean up my mess, saying that my room looked as if a tornado had just swept through it.

Jack pushed me gently into the middle of the room, but held me tightly against his side as I looked around in silence. After a few moments, he said, "Are you OK? Do you want to stay here or not?"

I looked up and gave him a warm smile. "This is fine. This is home. We'll make new memories here to replace the old ones." I threw my bag onto the sofa and turned into his arms until I was facing him, pressed hard against him.

Jack raised an eyebrow and his lips curled into a lascivious smile. "Shall we start in your bathroom? Like Matt said, a good wallow in a hot tub sounds like a really good notion right now."

That suddenly gave me an idea. "Just wait here a second."

I raced into my bathroom and grabbed the robes and thick fluffy towels that had been left there for us. When I got back to the bedroom I flung the robes at Jack, saying, "Here, take these and come with me."

He looked a little bewildered as I dragged him out into the corridor. A couple of turns and one more flight of stairs brought us to the door I was aiming for. I nodded at Jack, "Can you open the door, please?" I had my hands full of towels. Yes, I know I could have used my telekinesis, but I have to make my husband feel useful sometimes, OK?

No, not just for that. You have a dirty mind.

Jack shifted the robes to his left arm and opened the door. It swung inwards to reveal an extraordinary space. Decorated with pictures of unicorns playing in meadows, the room had a large dining and seating area, but the most prominent feature was a central pit. It was empty now, but I remembered it filled with soft furs and cushions. My husband stood looking around, his mouth open in amazement. "What the hell is this place?"

I laughed, shifting the pile of towels I was holding to one arm and took his free hand, leading him around the central pit to a door on the far side. "You ain't seen nothing yet!" I gestured to the closed door. "Open that one, too."

Jack looked down at me and smiled. "I hardly dare. What's in there? Dragons?"

I laughed out loud. "Better than that. Go see." Jack opened the door and we walked in together. It was everything I remembered.

The room was a cross between a Roman bath and a grotto. Two walls and the floor were covered with mosaics of underwater scenes. The wall directly to the left of the door depicted mermaids

floating through the water, while the floor and ceiling showed a coral reef with all its colorful inhabitants.

Beside the entrance door, two organic looking hand basins made of stone emerged from the wall, the taps flowing out of the stone almost naturally. A big mirror over the basins reflected the mosaic on the far wall, making the room seem even larger than it was and it was already huge. Above the mirror a soft light seemed to emerge directly from the wall. Every edge and corner in the room was rounded, so the whole thing looked almost alive. But the most astonishing feature took up the whole right hand wall, opposite the mermaid mosaic: the bath tub.

It consisted of one large rock that was formed like a wave, going up the wall and left frozen when it started coming back down. There were two cavities carved into the rock's base, the one on the right an irregular oval, deep and long enough to lie in. The other, on the left, was round and cut much deeper into the stone, with a bench emerging from the rock half way to the bottom of the pool, making plenty of space for two people to sit or even three. Just above the tub's floor, soft blue-green lights gave the whole room even more of an underwater feeling.



If Jack had been open-mouthed with astonishment in the previous room, now he looked completely dumbfounded. "How the hell did this place get up here? We're on the second floor, for gods' sake! Most of this looks like it's been hewn straight from living rock, all in one piece. There's no way this could have been hauled up here."

I laughed again, remembering when Ilas, Lily and I had worked together to create this space. It hadn't been a full merge as Demon hadn't joined us, but Ilas had used her shapeshifting abilities, linked to my telekinesis, to form and shape the rock to Lily's design. It had taken us days, and then Lily had spent further weeks creating the mosaics.

I dropped the towels on the hand basins and turned to take the robes from Jack's hands, putting them down with the towels. Then I pulled my husband into my arms, while reaching out with my mind to activate the controls which started the hot water running into the deeper of the two tubs. "It's magic, Jack. Don't you know you married a witch? Now, let's get naked and wet."

My wish was his command and within seconds I was kneeling on the bench, tits deep in steaming hot water, while Jack stood behind me, submerged to his waist, thrusting into me hard and fast. I was just on the edge of orgasm when a wave of bliss swept over us both, tipping us into a screaming morass of pleasure.

Jack collapsed onto my back and groaned, then whispered in my ear, "I guess we know what Matt and Demon are up to."

I giggled then pouted as he withdrew from me. Turning to face him, I settled myself onto the bench so the hot water came up to my shoulders. Jack sat beside me, sliding down until only his face was above the water. He smiled as he said, "That was fun. Can we stay here a while longer? Or does someone live here?"

"We can stay as long as we like. This was Lily's bathroom, and she's not coming back any time soon." Lily and her family were far out on space, many weeks' travelling time away from Eriadne. She had pouted a little about missing out on the fun when we'd told her we were coming to Eriadne. You wonder how someone can pout over a mental link? You haven't met Lily. She has talent.

I reached out with my mind again and turned on the whirlpool feature, making the water bubble around us, constantly replenished so it never cooled. Jack laughed. "I feel like I'm sitting in a witch's cauldron. It's a good thing I like my witches hot and wet." He leaned over and pulled me across him until I was facing him, straddling his knees.

You can guess what happened next.

We spent the rest of that day in that glorious tub, occasionally assailed by waves of pleasure sweeping through the castle, making it clear that Matt and Demon were spending their day in much the same way as we were. Happy homecoming!

24th September 2288

*We met up at breakfast to start the celebration of Demon's birthday. Matt and my sister looked nearly as smug, sore, satisfied and shattered as Jack and I did. As we sat down, Demon sent to me, [/*Did you enjoy yourselves yesterday?*]/]*

*I gave her a blissful smile and sent back, [/*We certainly did! I now know how much fun Lily used to have in her bath. It was lively enough with just one man in there with me; I can't imagine how she used to cope with two!*]/]*

*Demon's mental chuckle was deep and dirty, [/*Then you have a very limited imagination, Angel. Although I would never have thought of using Lily's bathroom. Hmm...*]/]* Her thoughts trailed off but not before I had caught some of things she'd envisaged, which gave me more information than I really wanted about what she and Matt got up to in the bathtub. But there was one position I caught that I hadn't tried myself and that surprised me. I didn't think Demon would be willing or able to do *that*! It just goes to show how even people you've known for most of your life can still amaze you. I looked at my sister with a whole new respect for her athleticism, her flexibility and her lung capacity.

*We gave Demon her birthday gift—a book, what else? But a very nice book. It was a beautifully bound edition of *The Silmarillion*, which matched the equally beautifully bound copy of *The Lord of the Rings* that Matt had given her—then talked about our plans for the day.*

Jack said, "We're going to mooch around town, looking in the shops and seeing if there's anything on offer that we might be able to trade. We'll see what contacts we can make." He gave Matt a significant look before he went on, "And I want Angelique to see if she can pick out anything for her birthday gift from me. I forgot to get her something before we left Minbar and I always prefer her to choose for herself anyway, to make sure I don't get something she hates."

My husband was being a little disingenuous, as he always got me beautiful gifts, which I treasured. But he got the shocked response he'd been angling for.

"Jack! How could you leave it so late to get Angel a gift! Her birthday is the day after tomorrow, or had you forgotten that, too?" Demon glared at Jack in outrage on my behalf.

I linked quickly and told her to calm down, Jack was just teasing. Or I hoped he was. There would be trouble if he wasn't. I changed the subject quickly and asked Demon what she planned to do for her birthday.

She looked down at her hands, which were resting in her lap and said quietly, "I'm going to try to see Ranikir again."

Jack and I protested and tried to persuade her to leave it for another day, but Demon shook her head then looked up at us, with tears in her eyes.

"I have to keep trying. She's never let me explain why Nikarran left so suddenly and why he didn't come back. I know he left her a note telling her he would be away for a few weeks, possibly months, doing something for me, but he didn't tell her what I'd asked him to do, as he knew I didn't want anyone to know until much later. All she knows is that her father walked out one night, that he never came back and that he died on Mars. I need to tell her what he did for me, how he died and how we got justice for him. I owe her that, and I can't go another year of my life without trying again. So today is precisely the day when I need to speak to her. If she'll let me."

A tear trickled down Demon's face and Matt reached out to fold her in his arms. I looked at him, pleading, "Matt, don't let her do this, please. It wasn't Demon's fault that Nikarran left, it was mine. And it was my fault he died, not hers. So I should be the one telling Ranikir why her father never returned, not Demon." Tears were streaming down my face as I finished, and Jack pulled me close to him for comfort. I sobbed into his shoulder but then felt a hand closing over mine.

I looked down through eyes bleary with tears and saw Matt's hand holding mine tightly. Looking up, I saw him giving me the gentlest look I have ever seen from him. He gave a sad little smile and said quietly, "You didn't ask Nikarran to take you away, Angel. Deborah did that. And she only did it because of how I behaved. So Deborah and I have to go and see Ranikir. It's because of us that he left Eriadne, but none of us are responsible for his death. Those evil bastards on Mars did that. Our only consolation is that they were eventually brought to justice and mind wiped. Whatever else Galen did, I'll always be grateful to him for making sure that happened."

We all fell silent for a while, remembering the Technomage who had died on Eriadne. No, let's be honest about it. The Technomage who I'd killed on Eriadne, after he attacked my sister and my family and nearly killed my husband. I begrudged feeling grateful to him for anything, but I let it pass.

Jack broke the silence, giving me a gentle push and standing up himself. "Right. Let's get this show on the road. I hope your meeting goes well, Demon, and if it doesn't, I hope you can still enjoy the rest of your day. We'll see you at dinner."

He hustled me out of the door before I got chance to resist and we were soon out of the castle and striding down the hill to the town. I had to trot to keep up with Jack and before I knew it we had arrived at the spaceport. Apparently, we were going to visit the crew of Serenity before we went

shopping. This was news to me, but sometimes I let Jack be masterful so he can pretend he's in charge.

But we know better, don't we?

The boarding ramp was down, and Harry was sitting sunning himself in a deckchair at the top, with Baby lying at his side, fast asleep. No one was going to sneak past those two. My puppy woke as Jack and I clattered up towards them, and soon started baying with excitement at seeing me, running around Harry's chair, getting himself, Harry and the chair all tangled up in his leash. I sat on the deck, untangled Baby then played with him while Jack went on inside the ship to speak to Ana Clara and Frank.



Harry told me that he'd taken Baby on walks up to the castle and made sure that he was only let off leash in a completely secure area. "I took him to the orchard, Miss Angel, when I took flowers for Bubba's grave. Baby had a good run around there and I made sure that none of them nasty birds that killed Bubba were anywhere near."

I grasped Harry's hand and squeezed it tight, silently vowing to visit Bubba's grave and lay some flowers myself. I was still sure that Harry's brother hadn't died accidentally, but that Lucas Buck had somehow manipulated events.

When Jack rejoined us, I took the opportunity to ask Harry if he would mind taking the remainder of my bags up to the castle. He gave me a big grin and said, "That would be great, Miss Angel. I can take Baby with me and let him have a run around the lawns inside the castle if they'll shut the gates."

I assured him that they would if he asked, and gently reminded him that he was welcome to stay in the castle if he wished. He shook his head vehemently. "No thank you, Miss Angel. Me and Baby is better off here where we know where everything is. He got away from me a couple of times the last time we stayed up there when you and the Captain got married and I don't want that to happen again."

So I thanked him for his help and for looking after Baby, then Jack and I left Serenity and the spaceport and started on our mission to find trade goods, both legal and illegal.

When we arrived back at my rooms that evening, all my extra bags had arrived and were stacked in a neat pile in the corner. I gave a little squeal of delight and pounced on them, opening each one and dragging out the contents, scattering them around so I could see everything I'd packed, before I made my decision as to what to wear for dinner that night. Jack stood by the door, watching as I created complete havoc around me, but bravely refraining from comment.

After a few moments he said, "I'll get out of your way and have a shower now, so the bathroom will be clear for you once you've got yourself sorted."

I grinned at him and waved him out of the room, before returning to my decision making. It was no time at all before he was back, only clothed in a towel that looked as if it would drop to the floor with only the tiniest telekinetic tweak. I gave a little growl and went to move towards him but he laughed and held me off.

"Not now, Angelique. You only have an hour before we need to be downstairs for dinner. That's barely enough time for you to get ready." Jack knows me so well.

I pouted a little but acknowledged that he was correct, silently vowing to make up for this lost opportunity later. As I moved towards the bathroom, Jack stopped me and asked, "Have you decided what to wear?"

I nodded and gestured at the red dress laid out on the bed, with the matching red lace bra lying on top. There were no panties as I didn't plan to wear any. The skirt of the dress was very full and fell to just below my knees so there was no danger of exposing myself. Unless I found a hot air grating and stood over it like Marilyn Monroe. I did a quick search of my memory of the castle to see if I could find such a thing, but regretfully failed.

I looked up to see Jack grinning at me. "You're going commando tonight then? I might take advantage of that later."

I winked back at my husband, "Promises, promises," and skipped out of the room.

It took me around forty-five minutes to shower, wash and dry my hair, then put on some cosmetics. I don't usually wear much make-up but tonight was a special occasion, so I used some eye-liner, mascara, blusher and lipstick. I didn't bother wrapping myself in a towel as I was completely dry by then, so I just strutted nude into the bedroom.

Jack looked up from the data-pad he was reading, and his eyes widened when he saw me posing, stark naked, in front of him. He licked his lips, which for some reason appeared to have gone dry, and croaked, "Are you going down to dinner like that? You'll make Matt and Frank very happy if you do, but you'll embarrass the hell out of Harry."

I laughed and dropped myself onto Jack's knee, putting my arms around his neck and kissing him passionately. When I felt the stirring in his groin where I was pressed up against him, I jumped up and grinned down at him. "That's for turning me down earlier." I started to walk away.

The teasing earned me the quick swat on the buttocks that I'd been hoping for and I sighed with regret that we didn't have time for Jack to turn me over his knee and give me the proper spanking I deserved. I looked over at the bed and saw my dress and bra still laid out, then suddenly realized that all my other clothes were no longer scattered around the room. Jack had tidied everything away while I was in the shower.

I bit my tongue and told myself not to react. He'd meant well and hadn't made a single comment about my messiness, so he deserved some credit. But I quietly planned my revenge.

I slipped my breasts into the lacy red bra, adjusting them to ensure that I was displaying a full cleavage then carefully pulled my dress over my head, leaving my hair undisturbed where I had twisted it up into a French knot. The dress was red—of course—with a tight fitting bodice, long

sleeves and a low scoop neck. The skirt was full and it swirled around my knees, feeling soft and sensuous against my skin. I made a sudden decision.

"Jack, where did you put my underwear?"

He gestured towards a chest of drawers standing next to the wardrobe and said, "Bras and panties in the top drawer, stockings and socks in the next one down." Military life had made my husband very organized.

I opened the second drawer and took out a pair of sheer black silk stockings; the ones with the lacy elastic tops so I don't need suspenders. I moved over to the sofa where Jack was sitting, lifted my foot to rest between his legs, dangling the stockings from one hand, while flipping my skirt back with the other. This gave Jack a close up view of the area I had trimmed earlier for his later delectation. "Will you help me put them on please, Jack?"

My nipples were hard little rocks, rubbing almost painfully against the inside of my bra as I heard Jack's sharp intake of breath. His hands were shaking slightly as he took the stockings, then lifted my foot and slid the first one up my leg. Once in place, I moved my foot to the ground and lifted my other leg. This time, my toes made contact with Jack's groin and he gave a soft moan as I rubbed them against him, feeling him hardening again.

But he stayed silent as he lifted my foot and slid the stocking up my leg. This time, after he had moved the lacy top into place, he quickly thrust a finger inside me and started to rub my clitoris with his thumb. I was panting with desire as he thrust harder and faster, and my nipples felt ready to explode. I was seconds away from orgasm when Jack removed his fingers, grabbed my skirt and pulled it down over my knees, then moved me until I was standing on both feet. He stood quickly and grinned down at me as he reached out to tweak my nipples, which were protruding from my chest like tent pegs.

The grin he gave me was pure evil. "We're out of time, Angelique. You should have got ready quicker." He leaned down to grab my sandals then pulled me out of the door, still barefoot.

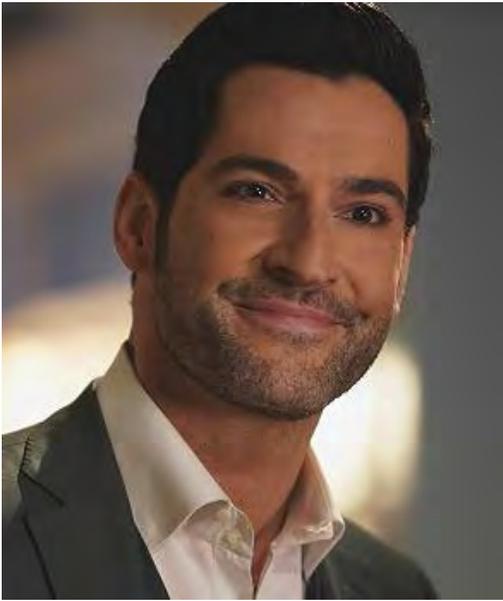
Sometimes my husband is an absolute bastard.

As we half ran along the corridors and down the stairs I plotted my revenge.

Jack at least let me pause long enough to put my sandals on before we entered the dining room, last of course, and greeted the rest of the party.

Kirrin, Thikira and Kullkarren were all dressed in their finest Brakiri traditional costumes, which were dark and formal. Frank and Ana Clara both looked splendid. Frank wore a grey suit and white shirt, open at the neck, and he looked very sexy indeed. Ana Clara was resplendent in a close fitting blue dress that showed off her exquisite figure. Even Harry looked smart, wearing a dark t-shirt under a jacket. In case you were wondering, Shukar had stayed on Serenity, Baby-sitting.

I looked over at Matt and Demon, and saw that Matt had dressed in black pants and a white shirt, but his was buttoned up to a mandarin collar, which suddenly reminded me of the way Lucas used to dress, and I had to suppress a slight shudder.



Demon looked amazing. She wore a black velvet corset that fitted so tightly I wondered if her breasts were going to pop out of the top. By some miracle of engineering they stayed in place all evening, but I could see that Frank appeared equally concerned as he could hardly take his eyes off them, no doubt waiting to leap to the rescue and scoop them back in if an accident occurred. I could see Ana Clara smiling as she watched the direction her husband's eyes had taken; she wasn't in the slightest bit concerned as she knew exactly where Frank's loyalties lay. Even if his eyes strayed occasionally, no other parts of his anatomy ever wandered. If they had, she would probably have cut them off and he knew it.

The tight corset also nipped in my sister's waist, emphasizing her curves. Below the waist, Demon wore a black skirt made from a heavy jersey silk that clung to her like a second skin, stopping just above her knees. It accentuated her long legs and made it absolutely clear that I wasn't the only witch who wasn't wearing her knickers that night.

Matt stood with his arm around his wife, beaming with delight, knowing that every man in the room was lusting after her, but that he was the only one who would be taking her to bed later. If they made it that far. It wouldn't have surprised me to find them with Matt taking my sister up against a wall somewhere, or bending her over the bannister, fucking her hard from behind.

But my own husband looked equally smug as his arm encircled my waist, holding me tight against him, equally sure that every man present envied him and totally secure in knowing that I would never stray from his arms or his bed.

Dinner was delicious and great fun, with witty conversation, wines flowing freely and many toasts made to the birthday girl. Jack gave the old toast I'd heard before, which always made Demon blush:

*"Here's to the lady who dresses in black,
who always looks sweet and never looks slack.
And when she kisses, she kisses so sweet,
she makes things stand that have no feet."*

It was late when our guests left, and Jack, Matt, Demon and I were alone at the table, finishing the last of the coffee and port. We were all feeling very mellow, but still sober enough to talk sensibly. Matt looked over at Jack and me, asking, "So how did your day go? Did you find anything useful?"

Jack nodded. "A couple of merchants have goods we can buy for trade, but no advanced tech, and no weapons. But we did get a hint from one guy that he might have something interesting for us. We're going back tomorrow for a second look. I think I'll take Harry with me. The trader was the sort who'd be impressed by us having a bodyguard." Of course, if anything bad did happen, I could defend us far more effectively than Harry, but we didn't want to make that obvious.

Jack went on to tell Matt how we'd got the trader, Branool, to confide in us. He'd been wary at first, until Jack had hinted that although Matt was his 'brother' they didn't entirely agree on their attitude towards trade and profit. Branool was willing to believe this as he'd been on Eriadne twelve years before when Lucas Buck had arrived. He'd done business with Lucas—who had actually been using his own name for once during that visit—and was quite willing to believe that Jack was a relative of his and was both prepared to do clandestine deals, and to trade in illegal goods. The Brakiri's confidence was increased by seeing me at Jack's side, as he remembered me leaving Eriadne with Lucas.

I can only assume he must have been off planet when Jack and I got married, as he didn't make any mention of my return to Eriadne since I'd left with Lucas. You can imagine how wonderful I felt about being associated with Lucas Buck yet again, and hearing him being discussed, but I gritted my teeth and got through the meeting. It seems that I can never escape from memories of Lucas. He still haunts me and probably always will.

Matt glowered when Lucas' name was mentioned but I saw Demon place her hand on his arm and she sent a wave of calm to keep him from exploding. The name Lucas Buck always has that effect on him. When Jack had finished, Matt took a deep breath and said, "Good, that's a start." He started to rise, when Jack interjected quickly.

"Hold your horses, Matt, there's more." Matt dropped back into his seat and waited. After a sip of brandy, Jack went on, "Did you know there's an IPX team working down here right now?"

The way Matt suddenly sat bolt upright made it clear that he hadn't known. Jack continued, "They're excavating out at some old ruins. Interesting, isn't it?"

Matt leaned forward across the table, saying, "Damn right it is. I think we might just pay this group a visit tomorrow. Can you and Angel fit that into your busy schedule?"

Jack turned to me and grinned. "What do you think, love? Shall we help out the Entil'Zha just this once?"

I swatted Jack's arm and replied, "Of course we will!" I then turned to Matt and went on, "It would seem the IPX team isn't very popular in town. They arrived about a month ago, at roughly the same time that the comet first appeared in the sky, so the townspeople think they're somehow linked and that they're a terrible omen of death and disaster. So anything that goes wrong, any accidents of any kind are being blamed on the xenoarcheologists. There's a lot of bad feeling towards them, so it might be an idea if we warned them to be careful with their security."

Matt nodded and we made arrangements to meet for an early breakfast then to go straight over to the ruins on fly-bikes. Demon went a little pale at the idea, but Matt promised her that they'd stay low and he'd let her drive. That made her smile, so it seemed a good time for the question that had been on my mind all evening.

I turned to my sister and asked, "How did the visit to Ranikir go?" I hadn't said anything earlier as I hadn't wanted the others to see if Demon got upset.

Demon's face immediately shifted into that flat, expressionless mask that she uses to hide her feelings. She said quietly, "She refused to see us. Kullkarren answered the door and the poor boy was so embarrassed at his mother's behavior that we just apologized for bothering them and left. I may try again before we leave." She took a deep breath and then changed the subject. "Kullkarren came back up to the castle with us and Matthew started on his assessment this afternoon. He looks very promising."

I knew it was pointless trying to get her talk more about Ranikir, so I stayed quiet as she went on, "Now, I really need to get out of this corset. It was very sweet of Matthew to get it for me as a birthday gift, but I probably should have worn something less restrictive for dinner." She turned to her husband and smiled sweetly, "Will you help me get out of it, darling?"

Matt shot up from the table and moved like a greyhound released from the traps, dragging Demon behind him. Jack laughed at their hasty retreat, then beckoned me to come and sit on his knee. I nestled down onto his lap with my arms around his neck. He slid one of his hands under my skirt and started to stroke my thigh, gradually working his way upwards until his fingers slipped inside me. My breathing faltered as I became more and more aroused.

Jack then whispered, "I think we'd better let them get a good head start or we could find Matt banging Demon up against a wall somewhere."

I giggled, as his thinking echoed mine. Then he said, "Everyone else has cleared out, so we have this room to ourselves. Have you ever done it in the dining room before?"

I shook my head, panting with excitement at the thought.

The next thing I knew, I was on my back on the table, my legs spread high and wide, and Jack was buried deep inside me, bringing me to yet another orgasm. Just how many times can a girl come in one day? Maybe one day I'll find a limit, but not that day.

That day I planned to set a new record.

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