

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

by The Space Witches



Throne

Chapter 8

28th September 2288

Jack Gideon

It would be fair to say that I'd not been happy when Matt set out his plans for that day, and I remained unhappy about those plans right up to the moment when Angelique and I walked into Branool's warehouse. Unfortunately, I'd been stupid enough to express my discontent as a demand that my wife should take no part in Matt's plan. I should have learned better by now, shouldn't I? Making demands or giving orders to Angelique was the proverbial red rag to a bull. It had made her dig her heels in and insist that she was going to do exactly what Matt wanted.

I had a niggling suspicion that Matt had manipulated both of us but if that were true, then he knew us a damned sight better than I was comfortable with. I hate being predictable but if anyone can foresee my behavior then it would be Matt. I guess being the same person for over forty years counts for something.

When we'd finished making like removal men, I'd left Matt and gone up to Angelique's rooms. She'd been waiting for me, playing with Baby on the sofa. The smile she'd given me as I entered was enough to show me that I was forgiven. I did wonder whether I should try again to dissuade her from joining me in a meeting with Branoöl, but I realized that firstly, it would be pointless and secondly, it would start another fight.

So I smiled back and dropped myself onto the sofa next to my wife, stretching and yawning as I did so. I placed my arm around Angelique's shoulders and pulled her close to me, which allowed Baby to drape himself over us both. We sat in silence for a while until I yawned again, this time so widely that I heard my jaw crack. Both Angelique and Baby looked up at me, startled by the noise.

"Sorry. I'm a little weary." I clenched my jaws to prevent another yawn as I was afraid I might suck all the oxygen out of the room.

Angelique grinned up at me. "If you're that tired, maybe we should go to bed."

So she made up a bed for Baby in her spell room, put some food in a bowl along with a separate dish of water, then closed the door. We fell into our bed but we didn't sleep immediately. There were other more urgent things to be attended to. I didn't care how tired I was, I was never going to climb into bed with my naked wife and go straight to sleep. But I have to admit that it wasn't a drawn out session. Not quite wham bam thank you ma'am, but close. Just long enough to satisfy us both, then we fell back and held each other, initially content with the silence that followed.

Angelique spoke first, asking softly, "Who did you see last night, Jack? You haven't been quite yourself today."

I think that was a reference to my short temper in the dining room earlier, but I let it pass. I contemplated telling her that I was just tired, but decided that she'd almost certainly know I was being evasive. So I told her about Galen's visit, what had been said and how it had been left.

Angelique was initially outraged at the idea of the Technomage daring to come back after all he'd done, but she calmed when she realized it wasn't her version of Galen I'd seen, but the Mage from my own universe. She didn't stay calm when I told her what Galen had said about the destruction of Eriadne in that reality. She was muttering about pathetic excuses and wishing she could kill him in both universes when I hugged her tight and told her it didn't matter. It was all in the past, there was nothing that could be done, so I planned to move on with the life I had now, and put the past behind me.

And it was true. Speaking to Galen had made me aware again of how lucky I was to be where I am, leading the life I live, with the woman I love. I can't change what happened in my universe. I can't alter the actions other people had taken that prevented me from finding the cure to the Drakh plague. I can only move forward and thank the gods I don't believe in for having brought Angelique into my life.

I held her tightly as she told me about her visit from her mother, and the information she'd received.

"I always knew my mother loved me and in that way I was luckier than Demon. But deep down I was resentful that her father had loved her but I was just a breeding assignment. His leaving before

I was even born cut deep. But now I know it wasn't like that. He really loved my mother and I was born from that love. Oh, maybe he was also doing what the Vorlons wanted, but it wasn't just that, Jack. He really loved her and I think he would have stayed with us if he could. It feels good to know that."

I didn't completely accept Angelique's logic but I was happy for her. She'd been given something precious by her mother the previous night. If nothing else, it was a reminder of how much her mother had loved her. If she chose to think that her father would have loved her too, had he been allowed, then I wasn't going to try and persuade her otherwise.

We fell asleep soon after and slept soundly until woken by my commlink.

It was Branool.

"If you want to do a deal on these goods, then come to my warehouse at sunset. No weapons, no communicators, just you, on your own." His deep voice ground out the instructions.

"Not on my own, Branool. My wife and I are equal partners in our business. Either we both come or the deal is off." Angelique was nodding vigorously beside me.

After some grumbling, Branool accepted that he'd have to deal with both of us, and gave instructions on how to find the warehouse, as we'd only been to his offices before. "And make sure you bring the credits with you. The seller wants cash."

I laughed outright at that. "Oh yeah, like I'm going to walk into your warehouse carrying that amount of credit with no weapons and just my wife for company. Not a chance." The Brakiri trader couldn't know that as long as my wife was with me I could have walked in carrying the crown jewels of England and he wouldn't have been able to take them off me.

We dickered back and forth for a while before eventually agreeing that we'd meet at his warehouse, view the items for sale and agree the price. We'd then meet again at a later time in a neutral location, where the goods and credits would be exchanged. I knew that the follow up meeting would never take place but Branool didn't.

I cut the call and then contacted Matt, again using my shiny new commlink. The commlink just like the one that he'd claimed he didn't own.

Bastard.

I'm sure Demon didn't tell him what she'd planned to give me for my birthday.

I just hoped I was interrupting Matt in something important, and from the tone of his voice when he told me to fuck off, I think I did. I laughed. OK, I laughed a lot. I just hope I hadn't upset Demon. She's far too good for him. The problem is that I think he knows it.

I brought him up to date on the meeting with Branool and agreed to meet with him and Demon in an hour, then turned to Angelique who'd been listening to everything as she lay beside me. The sheets were pulled up to cover her beautiful breasts but I planned on fixing that.

"We've got an hour. You can either spend it getting ready or..."

We hit the bathroom fifteen minutes before we were due downstairs. I've never seen Angelique shower and dress so quickly and by some miracle, we made it down to the dining room before Demon and Matt, despite having detoured to drop Baby off with Nisrina and Lowanna.

Having set up Angelique's ball of sight in the dining room as Matt had requested, we headed off for our meeting with Branool. I'd been pleasantly surprised at Demon's kiss as we left, but had been far less happy about Matt kissing my wife. It's OK for me to enjoy his wife's attentions, but NOT for him to enjoy kissing Angelique. And if that's not fair, frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.

So I was feeling a little disgruntled as we walked down the hill into town, but having Angelique by my side, holding my hand tightly, soon cheered me up. I just wished we'd been going back to our bunk on Serenity rather than to some doubtless dark and dank warehouse for a dangerous rendezvous, with me unarmed and with no commlink to call for the Calvary if it was needed.



And yes, I know it's cavalry. Just my little joke. You could pretend to laugh.

Of course, Branool didn't know that the slender woman next to me was just about the most powerful weapon in the galaxy, and she could also communicate with her sister in the blink of an eye. I don't believe in playing fair in risky situations. I like the odds firmly stacked in my favor.

We arrived at the location we'd been given to find a rather smaller building than I'd expected. Built from black stone blocks, it was only about three meters across and maybe two meters or so in height with a flat roof. It stood slightly apart from other similar structures, on a suitably murky back street. We arrived just as the sun was setting, making the thoroughfare even murkier.

The whole front of the building was taken up by two large doors, one of which opened a crack when we tapped out the rhythm Branool had specified. I was disappointed but not entirely surprised to see that it was Dagool, the trader's associate and apparently his cousin, who stood in the doorway.

*When I say 'stood in the doorway' I mean he pretty much filled it. Dagool was a big mother of a Brakiri. I mean *really* big. Bigger than Harry. He was over two meters tall, his head nearly touching the roof of the structure and he wasn't exactly skinny either. His face was covered in the tattoos showing his allegiance to the Chadi, and that wasn't reassuring. This was not someone you wanted to meet down a dark alley, but guess what? We were meeting him down a dark alley and were about to go into an even darker building with him.*

How do I get myself into these situations?

So I grinned up at him and said, "Branool said no weapons. I guess he forgot about you, didn't he?"

Dagool blinked a couple of times and frowned down at me. I don't think he got the point of my quip, so I tried again, speaking slowly, "We're here to see Branool. He invited us. OK?"

That earned a couple more blinks before an exasperated voice called from inside the building, "Let them in, Dagool. We can't get anything done with them standing out there."

So Angelique and I walked into the Brakiri's den, like two Christians on their way to meet the lions. Except in this case the Christians were carrying the equivalent of a mass driver that could bomb a planet back to the Stone Age. It's fortunate that the lions were only metaphorical as neither my wife nor I approve of blood sports. But Brakiri looters and smugglers were fair game and we were on the hunt. Branool and Dagool had targets on their backs.

The inside of the building was dimly lit—surprise—but we could see the depth of the place was at least double its width. I almost sighed with relief when I noted two important points. First, Branool had only brought Dagool with him for back up. The idiot probably thought that would be enough and most of the time he'd have been correct. Not tonight. Second, there were only five crates awaiting our inspection. I'd dreaded the prospect of there being many more. But we were OK. Five was manageable.

Before we could take more than two steps into the shadowy warehouse, Branool held up his hand. "That's far enough. We need to check you kept to the arrangements we made. Dagool will make sure you're not armed and you don't have any Comms devices on you."

I can't say that being patted down by Dagool was a pleasant experience. His pats were more like someone else's punches. But I gritted my teeth and only objected when he turned to Angelique. "Don't even think about touching her. You can see she's not carrying." My wife had worn a particularly clinging pair of black leather pants and a red sweater to the meeting, both of which fitted her like a second skin. She hadn't worn any jewelry that could have disguised a weapon or link, and she couldn't possibly have concealed a weapon or commlink anywhere else on her person.

Branool ran his eyes over her, then gestured for her to turn around, which she did. The bastard grinned appreciatively and said, "Maybe once we've agreed on a price for the weapons we can do another deal."

His meaning was clear and it nearly got him punched in the teeth, but I played along. "You couldn't afford the price."

That got me a painfully tight squeeze of my hand from Angelique and a laugh from Branool. "You'd better hope we can do a deal on the weapons then, or I may just take her as compensation for my wasted time."

I laughed back at him. "You could try. But I wouldn't recommend it."

*You may have noticed that Angelique had been unusually quiet all this time. This was deliberate. We wanted the Brakiri to ignore her, thinking she was just my decorative wife. Of course, she *is* my decorative wife, but so much more than that, as the Brakiri would soon find out. I'm not quite sure how Angelique managed to stay silent for so long as it's completely out of character for her to do so. Then again, she was an Oscar winning actress at one time, so I guess the role of meek, submissive*

wife was just another part for her to play. It's a role so far from her normal personality that she deserved another Oscar for the performance she gave that night.

Branool waved Dagool away from us, and the big Brakiri lumbered across the room and sat on one of the crates, which groaned under his weight. I gestured towards him and said, "He'd better not damage the goods doing that."

Branool sighed and waved at Dagool again, telling him to stand up and move to the side where he could keep watch on us all. That worked for me. I then said, "OK, where's your seller? Or perhaps he doesn't exist?"

The trader gave us what he probably thought was a crafty grin. "No need to get more people involved than necessary. More profit for us, eh?"

I nodded. "I always thought you were lying."

Branool frowned angrily. Apparently calling a Brakiri a liar is an insult to him and his water clan. "You're a mat," he said and spat in my direction.

I was puzzled. "Matt? I'm Jack. The other one is Matt, the goody two shoes who works for the ISA."



That amused the Brakiri trader. "You don't know Brakiri slang? A mat is..." he chewed his lip while he sought for the correct word. "Ah yes! A mat is what you would call an asshole."

I couldn't help but laugh, thinking about how much fun I could have with Matt about that later on. But all I said was, "Very funny. OK, let's see what you have on offer."

Branool gestured to Dagool again, and the big guy clomped over to the first crate, opening the top without a word. I never did hear him speak and I wondered if he was dumb. I mean in the sense of non-vocal. It was obvious that he was dumb as shit in every other sense of the word.

Angelique and I moved to look at the contents of the crate, but the trader warned us off. "Not too close." He started to pull items out that scared the crap out of me. They were definitely Shadow tech and when Branool described what they could be used for, I felt sick.

I could feel Angelique's hand shaking as she held my arm and I knew that she was equally sickened by what the trader was selling. After the first few items, she said softly, "I think we've seen enough, don't you, Jack?"

I looked down at her and nodded. "Yes."

Angelique turned to the trader and his cousin, smiled at them sweetly and said, "Good night."

They dropped to the ground.

I let out a huge sigh of relief. My wife had assured me that she could knock both men out without difficulty, but it was gratifying to see it happen. I'd asked her earlier how she planned to do it and she'd just grinned at me and said, "Vulcan neck pinch."

Eventually, after I tickled her into submission, she'd reminded me that she'd worked in Med-bay on the Excalibur for several years and had a detailed knowledge of the anatomy of most ISA species, including the weak spots where pressure could produce unconsciousness in seconds. She'd used her telekinesis to hit those exact spots on Branoool and Dagool, the results of which were now lying on the floor in front of us.

"How long do we have?" I asked.

Angelique shook her head. "Branoool will be out for a good half hour. The big guy..." she hesitated, "...probably less. I don't really know. I've never tried it on anyone his size before."

That didn't reassure me, so I said, "You'd better link to Demon to let her know you're on your way, then get going." She nodded then she was gone. Teleportation is damned unnerving for the observer.

The seconds ticked by, and it seemed like an eternity, but it was actually no more than a minute before she was back. She had her arms full, juggling with a small camera, a sampling kit, a PPG and a number of cable ties. I have to admit my doppelganger thinks of everything. Given the state of the Brakiris, the PPG wasn't likely to be needed, but better to be safe than sorry. I grabbed the weapon quickly before Angelique dropped it. It had the safety on, but I didn't want any risk of it going off inside the warehouse given the amount of armaments stored in there.

We used the heavy duty cable ties to truss the two Brakiris up like turkeys on Thanksgiving then Angelique grabbed Dagool by his collar and frowned in concentration. I knew this was going to be the most difficult lift for her, but she took a deep breath and vanished again, taking the big Brakiri with her. I used the time while she was gone to start opening crates and taking pictures of everything in the warehouse.

Then my wife popped back in and this time grabbed Branoool. Before she could disappear again, I asked, "Did you get Dagool into the cell OK?"

Angelique nodded. "Kullkarren was waiting for me, and he helped me get Dagool stretched out on the floor. I wasn't going to waste energy trying to lift him onto the bed. Then we got out of the cell and Kullkarren locked him in. Dagool isn't going anywhere for a while."

She blew me a kiss then disappeared again, along with Branoool. This time, I knew she was teleporting to the crypt where she would leave the trader with Matt and Demon. They would be ready to tie him down to the heavy throne we'd placed there earlier, using more of the cable ties that Ana Clara had taken up to the castle earlier that day. All was going to plan.

While Angelique was gone this time, I started looking for samples of hair, skin, bodily fluids and so on that I could gather for later testing, all to provide more supporting evidence of who had been handling the contents of the crates. When my wife re-joined me, she took a kit and started on the remaining crates. It didn't take us long to collect plenty of samples, certainly sufficient to satisfy the Eriadne Elders once we did a DNA comparison with our prisoners.

Now we needed to move onto the next stage of Matt's plan, and this was the part that concerned me most. We didn't want to leave the crates and weapons unguarded, but moving them through the open streets was not really an option. That left Angelique to do the heavy lifting, and she'd already

teleported six times, twice carrying heavy burdens. I was worried that the effort of moving the crates down to the hold of Serenity—where Shukar had already cleared plenty of space to await their arrival—might prove too much for her.

"Are you sure you can do this?"

Angelique smiled at me reassuringly. "I'm fine, Jack. Teleporting takes effort, and yes, the mass of what I'm carrying does make a difference, but not much. Most of the effort is in bending the space between where I am and where I want to be. Moving myself and anything I'm touching through from one side to the other is the easy bit. Well, it is now I've got better at the landing part."



She grinned and I laughed at the memory of how when she first started practicing her teleportation skills she had a tendency to come in sideways and rolling. I'd had to kiss a few bruises better before she'd got the hang of it. I don't even pretend to understand how my wife does what she does, but if she says she can do it, then I trust her implicitly.

She gave me another quick kiss then moved over to the first crate, which I'd repacked and closed while she'd been talking. She put her hand flat on top of the crate, grinned at me, winked and vanished. I shook my head, and got on with making sure that all the other crates were packed up and ready to go.

Five times, Angelique teleported out with a crate, and five times she came back. By the time the last crate had gone, I could see that she looked a little strained. When she came back, I pulled her close to me and said, "You don't have to do this again. We can just walk out of here and back up to the castle."

Angelique shook her head. "Better if we just vanish. Anyone watching who saw us come in will have a big puzzle on their hands. Let's bar the doors from the inside before we leave then they'll have a real locked room mystery to solve."

I smiled and moved to lift the bar into place, then turned to my beautiful wife, took her hand and said, "OK, let's go."

I won't even try to describe what happened next. I was in the warehouse, then I was in the castle entrance hall, and all I knew was that I felt faintly queasy, my stomach churning as if I'd just stepped off a rollercoaster. My knees wobbled slightly, and I grabbed the back of a chair that stood nearby to steady myself.

Kirrin and Kullkarren, both of whom were waiting for us, looked at me with concern. I shook my head and said, "I'm fine." I paused before opening the door to the dining room and asked, "Who's guarding the gate?" When we'd left for the meeting, Kullkarren had been on watch.

The young Brakiri reassured me. "I woke Hjalmar after you left. He came down and took over guard duty. We've bolted and barred the gate and the main door, so we're secure."

I thanked him, put my arm around my wife and said, "Let's go watch the show. I hope they haven't started without us. Who's got the popcorn?"

We didn't have popcorn, but Kirrin had laid out drinks and snacks in the dining room which Angelique and I attacked while we watched through the portal created by the ball of sight. My wife had assured me that the view was only one way, and that the people in the crypt could not see us watching. If they knew where to look, they might just see a wavering of the air molecules where the 'window' opened, but they'd have to look carefully. She'd also warned that sound travelled in both directions so we needed to be as quiet as possible while we watched what was happening down in the crypt.

You might wonder why we didn't watch on a data-pad as the images from the cameras set up earlier could easily have been routed through to one or more devices. Well, there were two reasons. First, the large opening created by the ball of sight gave us a much better and wider view, and second, Angelique told us quietly, she could reach through the portal with her telekinesis and move things on the other side if needed. She whispered this while munching her way through a large plate of sandwiches—I guess teleporting is hungry work.

I thought back on a few occasions when she'd played 'Poltergeist' with me, which always seemed to end up with a towel falling to the ground that I thought I'd secured firmly around my hips when I stepped out of the shower. It was about time she played that trick on someone else. As long as I was there to supervise of course; I didn't want my wife tugging at anyone else's towel.

All that was just a trailer before the main feature, which was of course the show going on down in the crypt. And what a blockbuster it was.

The portal showed Branool firmly tied to the 'throne' that Matt, Kullkarren and I had man-handled down into the crypt earlier. Off to one side, we could see the screen that we'd also taken down, which obscured the view of the door. What we knew and Branool didn't, was that Demon was sitting behind that screen, concealed from sight.

Branool was still unconscious when we all sat down to watch the show unfold. Matt stood over him, and gently kicked his ankle. Nothing too hard; just a nudge to see if he was coming round. It had the desired effect and Branool started to moan and mutter as he regained consciousness. I heard Kirrin sniff disapprovingly, and Kullkarren whispered almost silently, "Branool is speaking a Brakiri dialect that is considered very crude and uneducated by our water clan." I guess that meant he was swearing. As he'd been zapped in the brain stem by my wife, I couldn't deny he might have something to swear about. He probably had a killer of a headache.

Little did he know that his head was the least of his worries.

Matt waited patiently until Branool was sitting upright and had started to struggle with his bonds.

"Don't waste your energy. You're going nowhere." Matt's voice was low and dangerous. Not a nice voice to wake up to.

Branool froze for a second then looked up at the man looming over him. His eyes narrowed and he said, "You're the other one. Not..." He trailed off.

Matt sneered down at him. "Not the one you were dealing with? Not the one you planned to sell stolen weapons to? Not the smuggler who was going to take your stolen goods off your hands? No, I'm not him. I'm the other one. He's currently detained elsewhere while we investigate the guilty parties here."



I was impressed that Matt hadn't actually lied. Not that I objected to a good lie, but sticking to the truth is usually helpful where possible, as you don't have to remember what lies you've told. In this case, I ~~was~~ detained elsewhere. I was detained in the dining room, watching the show, snacking and sipping my drink, silently of course, so the performers in the crypt couldn't hear me.

Matt went on. "We can get this over with quickly, if you like. Just confirm that you're responsible for looting artefacts from the ruins and tell us who helped you, and we can all be on our way."

Branool laughed at him. "Why should I do that? I don't know what you're talking about."

I was starting to feel uncomfortable. Something was making me uneasy; not exactly fearful, but definitely anxious. I couldn't pin down why I was feeling that way then I realized that the feeling was coming at me through the portal. From her hidden position, Demon had started to project fear. Very low level at first, but gradually increasing as Matt walked silently around Branool's chair before arriving in front of him and staring down at him again.

It seemed like a complete non-sequitur when Matt asked, "Did you have a visitor last night, Branool? Did a ghost from your past come to talk to you?"

Branool sneered again and struggled with his bindings. "Superstitious nonsense."

I felt Kirrin bristling beside me and saw Kullkarren rest his hand on her arm to remind her of the need for silence.

Matt turned and gave Branool an evil grin. "I bet you made damned sure you stayed in company last night, didn't you? Because I'm guessing there are ghosts from your past that you don't want to meet." Of course, Matt wasn't guessing. Behind the screen, Demon would be sending silent signals to Matt's commlink every time Branool lied.

My doppelganger took another turn around the chair, walking slowly, and all the time the sense of unease and anxiety grew. Demon was definitely ramping it up now. When Matt arrived in front of Branool again, he asked another question. "Do you know what this space is?"

The captive trader narrowed his eyes and shook his head. Matt grinned. "It's called a crypt. It's where dead people are put into boxes and stored."

Branool's eyes widened with fear. Kirrin had told us earlier that the Brakiri don't bury their dead and they never put them in mausoleums or crypts; they cremate them. The idea of burying dead people who might just decide to come back and visit sometime other than the Day of the Dead was not something that appealed to the Brakiri. The colonists on Eriadne never went down to the castle

crypt and Kullkarren had only accompanied Matt and I earlier because we'd reassured him that all the tombs there were empty.

We'd lied of course. Actually, we had no idea whether there were bodies in the coffins or not. But Branool didn't know that.

Matt gestured to the boxes lining the wall. "Every one of those boxes contains a body. Or maybe more than one. And they've been there so long, I doubt if there's anyone left alive for them to visit. So maybe, just maybe, they won't want to wait another two hundred years to come out. Maybe now they have a visitor down here, and the comet is still lighting up the sky, they'll want to come out tonight to say hello."

I heard the scrape of a chair next to me, and looked around to see that Kirrin had pushed herself back from the table, and she looked scared. I guess the Brakiri have a real thing about their dead and what Matt was saying was getting to her. The waves of anxiety and fear that Demon was projecting didn't help either.

Both Matt and Branool must have heard the sound of the chair scraping, as the trader looked even more alarmed as he said, "What was that sound?"

I have to give it to Matt; the man knows how to improvise. He gave an evil grin and gestured to the stone boxes that lined the walls. "Sounds like someone's trying to get out of their box." If Branool looked frightened before, he looked absolutely terrified after that comment.

Then I felt Angelique lean forward as she sat next to me, on the other side from Kirrin. She was grinning from ear to ear and her eyes were flickering to from blue to black and back to blue again. Scary. As she leaned forward, she blew gently but silently into the portal. Branool tried to jump in his chair, but he was bound too tightly. He yelled, "What was that?"

Matt looked puzzled, "What was what?" He didn't realize at once that Angelique had joined in the fun. He hadn't asked her to use her powers, and for a moment I wondered if he knew she could reach through the window with her mind. My wife leaned forward again and this time I saw Matt's hair ruffled by the air she blew through the portal. Matt's eyes narrowed and he grinned. "Oh that. Did you feel something move? Maybe something touched you? Is it getting closer?"

It was interesting that he'd caught on so quickly. It made me wonder if my wife had played 'Poltergeist' with Matt sometime in the past. I was therefore glowering when Angelique took Matt's hint and leaned forward again. She whispered to me, "Just touching the back of his neck. Very gently. Very slowly. Now a bit more pressure," she paused then murmured, "and a bit more..."

Branool screamed. "Get it away from me! I can feel it. It's here. HE'S here! Get me out of here!"

Matt leaned right into the smuggler's face and grinned. It was an evil grin. I was quite proud of the fact that if he could grin like that, so could I. My doppelganger said softly, "I guess the ghosts are getting agitated. Come on, Branool, don't make me squeeze the truth out of you. Have the balls to confess what you've done."

I turned and looked at my wife and saw her face was screwed up into a grimace of distaste. She knew what Matt wanted her to do, although she didn't like it. But she must have gone ahead as

Branool suddenly let out a squeal of dismay as he tried to push himself back into the chair he was tied to. "Oh gods, he's got me! He's going to rip me apart for what I did; make him stop!"

We never did find out who Branool thought was touching him, but that was all it took to break him. Just an empath, a telekinetic and a tall story.

The tough trader crumbled and cried like a baby, confessing that he'd started digging at the ruins months before, finding things he could trade on the black market. He'd roped in his cousin, Dagool, as muscle for the job. When the IPX team had arrived he'd been worried they might catch him at his dig, so he'd started rumors in the town that they were looting the site, and that they were bringing bad luck down on the population. Then he'd set a couple of small fires, broken the handle on a well, sawed through the axle of a cart and carried out various other acts of mischief to rouse the townspeople's ire against the IPX visitors. He'd sent Dagool up to the ruins the day before, egging on others to follow and take care of the intruders once and for all.

This didn't all come out at once, of course. He tried to wriggle out of his responsibilities, but every time he lied, Matt called him on it. He was helped by having Demon sitting behind the screen, signaling him with a silent vibration to his commlink whenever the trader deviated from the truth.

Once the whole story had come out, it was all recorded and we had the weapons and the samples taken at the ruins and in the warehouse to back up the confession. I have to admit—very grudgingly—that Matt's plan had been a good one. Mostly because it had worked. The plans that work are always good ones.

By the time Branool stopped talking, Kirrin had got angry enough to overcome the fear she'd felt earlier. It helped that Demon had stopped projecting, so the undercurrent of fear and anxiety had dissipated. As soon as Angelique closed the portal, the Brakiri woman stood and demanded that the trader should be taken into the town immediately and locked up before being sent in front of the Elders the next day.

We were happy to leave her to arrange for a suitable guard to come up to the castle and take Branool and Dagool into custody. We agreed that we'd attend the meeting of the Elders mid-afternoon the following day and all the evidence and weapons would be presented at that time.

Kullkarren went out to warn Hjalmar to expect visitors, and then came back to await the arrival of the guard. When they arrived, he and Kirrin escorted them down to the crypt and cells where they released our captives and marched them out of the castle. I could only hope that Hjalmar didn't do a headcount as he might have noticed that two more went out than had come in. Kirrin and Kullkarren both bade us goodnight and left with the guards and prisoners.

When we were finally alone, it was late and we were all tired. Matt and Demon had joined us in the dining room where we sat talking about what we'd achieved that day, feeling rather good about ourselves and finishing off all the snacks Kirrin had prepared earlier.

It was only when we heard a gentle knock on the door that we remembered our guests. Nisrina and Hjalmar entered, with Baby tugging Lowanna behind him on his leash. Hjalmar quickly reassured us that he'd made sure the gate and door were both fully secured before leaving his post, although he gave me and Angelique a confused look, as he hadn't let us back into the castle, so obviously

wondered how we'd got there. When the archeologists asked if there was anything to eat we remembered that we hadn't made any arrangements to feed them that evening. That made us very poor hosts, but to be fair, we had been a little busy.

So everyone ended up in the kitchen, with Demon cooking omelets while Matt and I cut great doorsteps from loaves of bread. Angelique made a huge salad and a dressing from what she could find in the chillers then piled fruit up on a platter for dessert. Dinner that night was late as well as a bit rough and ready, but it was enjoyable all the same.

Food always tastes better when it comes after success.

In case you're wondering, Baby got fed bits of cheese under the table. It turns out Matt's as bad as I am for feeding dogs illicit snacks. And we both get told off by our wives for it.

The White Star arrived just before midnight.

Matt sent five Rangers up to the ruins to relieve my crew then positioned the rest around the castle in defensive positions. We all knew we'd sleep easier with the castle properly defended, so we said good night to the IPX people and prepared to go up to bed. Before we could hustle our guests off to their rooms Lowanna asked if she could take Baby for a walk around the inner courtyard and then take him up to Demon's rooms with her. I agreed eagerly, as I find having a pair of big brown doggy eyes watching me in bed with my wife can be off-putting.



So Angelique and I made our way up to her rooms and I'll leave what happened next to your imaginations. Then again, you probably couldn't even dream of some of the things Angelique and I got up to that night, but I will say that having a telekinetic for a wife can make our sex life interesting and varied.

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Homecoming

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