

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

by *The Space Witches*



Nisrina

Chapter 5

25th September 2288

Matthew Gideon

Waking in what I still thought of as Deborah's bed, I stretched over-used muscles and smiled to myself. My wife and I had been behaving like over-sexed adolescents since we'd left Minbar, and my body was telling me to take a break. All but one part of my body. That part was wide awake and standing to attention as it so often does early in the morning. So I told the rest of my body to stop complaining, rolled over, pulled myself up tight against my wife's back and started to nuzzle her neck. It didn't take long before she woke and started rubbing her butt against me, making me well aware of what she wanted.

Well, she got it. In spades. We then moved to the bathtub, where she got it again. My wife is a woman of many and varied tastes and I work hard to satisfy them all, even when I'm as stiff and sore as I was then. Fortunately, regenerators are wonderful things and Deborah is a skilled masseuse.

She soon worked my sore muscles loose, but did nothing for the stiffness. She likes some things good and rigid.

Look, I told you we were behaving like over-sexed adolescents, didn't I? Don't blame me if you asked for details.

You didn't? Tough.

Despite our rather over-active start to the day—which followed some vigorous and strenuous athletics the previous night, during which we'd gotten ourselves into pretty much every position in the Karma Sutra and a few that they didn't cover there, as they were rank amateurs—we still made it down for breakfast on time.

As we walked down the corridor towards the dining room, I grinned at Deborah and nodded at a particular spot on the wall. At just above head height there were two hand prints on the paint work, and at exactly Deborah's breast height, two round marks. That was as far as we'd got the previous night before our needs had overwhelmed us, so I'd lifted my wife's skirt and taken her standing, with her braced against the wall. The corset I'd given her for her birthday had finally burst open and her breasts had spilled out, leaving their imprints for everyone to see.

Deborah blushed and then gave a deep, throaty chuckle, which threatened to set me off again, but I grabbed her hand and hauled her down to the dining room, where our breakfast awaited us.

It was the only thing that was awaiting us, as inevitably Jack and Angel were late. I noticed as we entered that the dining table, which had previously stood in the center of the room, had been moved to one side and a new table stood in its place. Looking over at the old piece of furniture, I saw a large crack across the middle of it. I wondered how that had happened, but when Jack and Angel finally arrived and I saw the state they were in, I could make a pretty good guess at how the table had been broken.

They looked about as tired as Deborah and I did.

*But that table had been pretty solid. They must have been *really* going at it to break it.*

With a few groans and whimpers, we sat down, ate our breakfasts and made our plans for the day. There were still fly-bikes stored in the castle and the previous evening I'd asked Kirrin if they'd been regularly maintained. She'd assured me they had, and promised to have two of them taken out of storage and made ready for us that morning.

Once breakfast was finished, we went out into the courtyard, where the bikes awaited us. I carefully inspected the vehicle Deborah and I would be riding, and noticed Jack did the same for the other one. Neither of us was taking chances, although he had to less to worry about than I did. If his engine failed in flight, Angel could keep them aloft with her telekinesis.

As I moved to help Deborah onto the front seat of the bike, I started to laugh. I'd finally noticed what she was wearing and the memories of our first ride on a fly-bike together came flooding back. Just as on that day, she was wearing a black sundress that reached to mid-thigh, buttoned down the front, showing her shoulders and her cleavage. Over the dress she wore a black leather jacket. Her legs were bare to mid-calf, which was where the tops of her heavy, black lace-up boots ended. Her

hair was again tied back into a ponytail by a long, black scarf. Remembering what she'd done with that scarf—and one of my socks—nearly twenty years before made me laugh even harder.



Jack and Angel looked across in puzzlement, having no idea what had set me off. Deborah smiled at me, and said, "So you finally remembered, did you?"

I nodded and reached out to run my finger along the top of her breast where it emerged from her dress. "At least this time, the jacket should fit better." When she'd worn the outfit before, she'd been pregnant and

her breasts had been sufficiently swollen to prevent the jacket zipper from closing.

Then my smile faded as I remembered Nikarran walking across the courtyard on that morning so long ago, carrying the crossbows we'd needed for our trip. I didn't need a crossbow this time; I had a fully loaded PPG strapped under my arm, and a spare in an ankle holster. I was also sure that Deborah would have at least one knife strapped to her thigh and quite possibly more weapons secreted about her person.

"Come on, let's get you mounted." I gave my wife a lascivious grin and helped her onto the bike. On our previous outing she'd ridden behind me but today she was up front, driving the bike.

She got her revenge by wriggling her butt against my groin as I took the pillion seat behind her, then she leaned into the controls and lifted us off the ground.

But not too high. Deborah doesn't like heights.

Deborah flew the bike behind Jack's at a steady pace. I noticed that Jack had insisted on driving, earning a pout from Angel as she climbed onto the rear seat. I think Jack's previous experience of how Angel flies a bike had been quite sufficient. Not wanting his internal organs rearranged this time, he was keeping his hands firmly on the controls, but I could see that Angel was getting her revenge by putting her hands where they would most distract him. This led to one or two rather sudden bumps in their flightpath, but on the whole we had a smooth journey up to the ruins.

When we arrived we could see immediately where the Inter-Planetary Expeditions team had set up operations. There was large white tent with the side flaps rolled up, standing alongside a small shuttle. The team members had obviously heard the sound of the bikes arriving, despite the nearly silent engines, and they were standing at the foot of the shuttle ramp, waiting for us to descend.

There were three of them, all human, but each very different in appearance. As we introduced ourselves, we quickly sorted out who was who.

The short, older woman was the team leader, Nisrina Herianto, and she told us she originally came from Indonesia on old Earth. The huge blonde bearded Viking who loomed over us all was called Hjalmar Lindgren, and his family came—not surprisingly—from Sweden, but via the Orion VII

colony. The last member of the team was an indigenous Australian named Lowanna Djaru. She was the youngest of the team; a graduate student.

We introduced ourselves as visitors to Eriadne; traders who'd stopped off to see what goods we could buy and sell. We'd explained that Jack and I were twin brothers and we were out sightseeing with our wives, while the other four members of our crew had stayed with the ship. The name Gideon was never mentioned.

We asked what they were doing at the ruins and Nisrina explained that IPX had funded a small expedition to see if anything useful could be found on Eriadne B. IPX had obviously not been generous with their budget, as the three of them were living and working out of the tiny shuttle. A ship that size has no jump engines, and the Eriadne system has no jump-gate, so they must have been dropped off by a ship that would eventually return to collect them. Until then, they were on their own.

Once we'd all become friendly—assisted by Deborah's empathic sendings of warmth and affability—they took us into the shuttle for refreshments. There was barely room for all of us inside. Jack, Angel and Lowanna squeezed next to each other on the lower bunk running down one side of the cabin, while Deborah, Nisrina and I somehow fitted onto the opposite bunk, which was on the far side of a table that ran down the middle of the deck.

Hjalmar pulled out a folding chair and placed it at the head of the table, from where he could reach the kitchen area, which consisted of a single food heater. The chair groaned under his weight as he sat but surprisingly held up.

While he was heating water for coffee, Nisrina told us more about why they were there and what they were doing. She was probably more open than she would otherwise have been with strangers, again due to my wife's empathic projections creating a warm glow of camaraderie. We let her think that we weren't entirely familiar with what IPX did in their explorations.

I casually mentioned that the only Xenoarcheologist I'd ever come across before was a certain Maximillian Eilersen, who I'd encountered years before but had not really taken to. Nisrina laughed at that. "That doesn't surprise me at all. I knew Max well and he was a gigantic pain in the ass but he was good at what he did."

As she explained more about why they'd come to Eriadne it became apparent that Max had kept his promise after all. He'd never told IPX about the source of the material from which we'd developed the cure to the Drakh plague, but Nisrina had been a student of his during a brief period when Max had been a professor at Mars Dome University about thirty years before, well before he joined IPX and the Excalibur.

Nisrina smiled at the memory. "Max Eilersen was a terrible teacher. He had no patience for anyone who didn't think as fast as he did." That made me laugh; I remembered far too many occasions when Max had looked at me down that long nose of his with impatience and disdain.

Nisrina continued, "But he was a brilliant researcher and I never met a better linguist, so I gritted my teeth and hung on in there with him until he was finally dismissed for a dalliance with some undergraduate." That figured. Max had always liked his women young and his pornography exotic.

Ilas, Deborah's youngest sister and a shapeshifter, had been the perfect partner for him, along with Dureena, my favorite thief. All dead now; lost in the skies above Nabula four years before.

"After he died, most of his papers were left to MDU, and while they didn't give any details of where he'd found the data that led to the cure for the Drakh plague, there were clues, if you knew what to look for. I noticed that he'd made a couple of trips to this sector of space in the period leading up to the discovery of the cure, and I narrowed his destination down to Eriadne B. I eventually convinced IPX to give me a budget for this expedition. As you can see, it's a very small budget, which is fast running out as the locals are charging us well over the odds for any supplies we can buy."

She looked forlornly down into her cup of coffee, and I suspected that they may have just given us the last of their supplies. Well, that was something we could fix, at least. Or Jack could anyway.

If I twisted his arm a little.

I was about to ask how their dig was proceeding when Deborah did it for me. Her warm smile and the calm, soothing feelings she was projecting had them eating out of her hand.

"Not brilliantly, I must admit. We found some evidence of a previous excavation at this site, although it was obviously not recent. That led us to a trapdoor down into the underground area, but the place seems to have been stripped clean." Nisrina shook her head sadly, her expressive face showing her disappointment. She went on to tell us about the cavernous room they'd found at the bottom of a flight of stairs. It had been mostly empty, the floor peppered with holes where equipment had been removed. They'd found a number of signs that had been pried off the walls and laid out in a line down the center of the room.

"The writing is familiar. Not identical to any language I know, but similar. It almost looks like a version of Drakh."

This worried me. It sounded like they'd started investigating the excavation Max had left behind nearly twenty years before. Nisrina and her team were too good and they were getting too close to the secrets that Eriadne held. We needed to get them out of there before they discovered too much. I was about to tell them about the bad feeling towards them in town and the threat it presented when Lowanna spoke quietly.

"We did find some other signs of disturbance on the far side of the ruins, but we haven't looked at that area as yet." That earned her a worried glare from her team leader.

I closed my mouth quickly, and allowed Deborah to ask, "Really? Do you think they were made by the same people who were previously excavating here?"

Nisrina answered before Lowanna could speak again. She sighed, as if she's much rather not tell us what was happening, but felt compelled. Deborah's influence at work again. "No. They seemed much more recent and we were worried that whoever had been digging over there might come back, so we've left that area well alone. We have enough problems with the locals; we don't want to annoy them further by disturbing them. I just hope that they're not finding and stealing anything too valuable, but frankly we're just too vulnerable out here on our own to do anything about it."

Hjalmar broke his silence for the first time. "I've contacted IPX and asked for a ship to be sent with reinforcements, but there's nothing in this sector and they won't go out of their way for a small team like ours. It could be weeks or even months before they get here." He scowled down into his empty coffee mug which looked tiny in his large hands. "And they wouldn't allow us to bring any weapons with us, so we can't even defend ourselves if the locals get nasty."

I began to realize that these people were actively scared and persuading them to leave the site might not be too difficult after all. They'd also given me a lead on the location of the tech thefts, which I'd need to follow up later. But first, we needed to make sure the IPX team was safe.

"Why don't you bring your shuttle down to the spaceport? We'll be berthed there for a few days and can keep an eye on you."

Nisrina shook her head. "We can't. This old thing got us here in one piece—barely—but as soon as we landed she gave up the ghost. The engine is as dead as a doornail. We've had to walk down to the town for supplies, then haul them back up here again on foot. Hjalmar has been taking care of that while Lowanna and I have been doing what we can to keep the dig going up here."



Hjalmar nodded and said, "But the last time I went down, I couldn't find anyone willing to sell me any supplies, so we're running low on food as well as credits and we're stuck here until IPX can be bothered to send someone to help."

All three of the IPX team were slumped in their seats, looking down at the table dejectedly, and I could see that they were reaching the end of their emotional and physical resources. I looked across the table at Jack and Angel, then felt Deborah's hand on my thigh, squeezing gently. I turned to her as she whispered, "We have to help them, Matthew. We can't leave them like this."

I nodded and looked across at Jack. "Could you send Shukar up here to fix the shuttle?"

Jack nodded. "I'll call him now and get him up here to see what needs doing. He can bring supplies with him." He turned to Nisrina and asked, "Tell me what you need urgently and we can have it up here in a couple of hours."

The older woman's eyes filled with hope for a moment and then she frowned. "But we have no way of paying you for the repairs or the supplies."

I raised my hand and waved away her doubts. "Don't worry about it. I have contacts at the ISA who will cover any costs for a rescue mission." Damn right I did. The Rangers' funding from the ISA was generous and entirely at my discretion as to how it was spent, as long as it was fully accounted for.

*Jack used his shiny new commlink to call Serenity—I can assure you I had *not* known that we were going to give him one of those for his birthday. Deborah had been suitably chastised for not consulting me, which we had both thoroughly enjoyed—and arrange for Shukar to make his way up*

to the ruins, using the aerial quadbike they kept in Serenity's hold for hauling goods around on planet.

While he was speaking to Frank, Deborah and Angel had put together a list of the urgently needed supplies—including coffee—which Jack then passed on. Within ten minutes everything was arranged.

Jack said, "Shukar will bring up what parts he thinks he might need, but if he can't fix your engines with what he has, he'll have to go back down to Serenity to make anything he's missing. He's got a workshop on board where he can build pretty much anything needed to get and keep an engine running. He'll also bring up supplies to last you a few days at least. Once we've got your engines fixed we'll get you all down to the spaceport where you'll be safe. There are a few locals we know who'll make sure you're not bothered."

The looks of relief on the three faces of the IPX team were reward enough for what we were doing, but for me the added benefit was that I was getting them away from the place where they could easily discover more than I really wanted them to know.

The four of us rode straight back down to the spaceport, as Jack and Angel had an appointment with their trader in town, while I wanted to use Serenity's comm unit to contact the Rangers. While we had communications equipment up at the castle, it was nearly twenty years old and nowhere near as secure as the equipment Serenity had on board.

As before, Harry and Baby were sitting at the top of the boarding ramp, ready to receive all visitors. He told us that Shukar had already left to go up to the ruins, so after a brief delay while Angel made a fuss of her dog, she and Jack left for their appointment, with Harry accompanying them as 'bodyguard'. Ana Clara took over guard duty with Baby, while Frank waited for me inside. I'd called ahead to tell him that I needed his help with a Comms issue but I'd left it vague as I didn't want anyone in the area picking up on my signal.

I accompanied Frank to the bridge and waited while he set up a secure line to Minbar, leaving Deborah talking quietly with Ana Clara, playing with Baby's ears as the dog draped himself across her legs. I'd noticed that Frank had given the dog an envious glance before we went inside and I gritted my teeth. If Deborah was going to allow any man to drape himself over her lap while she played with his ears it would be me she played with!

And you can keep any comments about my ears to yourself.

It took about an hour to get through to Trulann on Minbar and arrange for a White Star to be diverted to Eriadne to pick up the IPX team. I also updated him on the results of Jack's investigation so far, asking him to arrange for the White Star to carry a crew of armed Rangers, ready and able to tackle any group that might be looting the ruins.

You're probably wondering why I hadn't arranged for a White Star to be standing by in the Eriadne system, ready to swoop in on any illegal activity we might find. Well, believe it or not, the Rangers' White Stars do have other things to do. I couldn't justify having one of them sitting around waiting while I investigated on Eriadne, when I had no real evidence that this was the source of the black market tech. Now, I could justify calling for the Calvary.

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

Satisfied with progress to date, I made my way back to the ship's entrance where Deborah was waiting for me. She stood as soon as she heard me and ran across the deck to meld into my arms. The kiss she gave me left me in no doubt that she was happy with me for arranging the rescue of the people from the ruins.

I deepened the kiss, becoming aroused as my wife pressed herself against me. Sliding my hand up the inside of her thigh, I almost laughed as my fingers encountered the knife holster she was wearing. Once past that, I paused then pulled my head back to look down at her. "You're not wearing your knickers, are you?"

She grinned up at me. "They keep getting ripped off me, so I thought I'd better conserve the supplies I have left. Just to save the environment, of course."

I smiled back down at her and moved my fingers up inside her. She gave a little gasp of pleasure as I touched her, and whispered, "I think we'd better take this inside, don't you?"

I nodded, removed my fingers and turned to Ana Clara who had discretely turned her back while we'd been talking.

"Ana Clara, if anyone wants us, we'll be in our bunk."

The shielding of our cabin took another pounding that afternoon, but at least the townspeople and Serenity's crew were protected from Deborah's projections.

I bet you're wondering how we keep going at it like bunnies on aphrodisiacs. Well, we have these wonderful things called regenerators. When we were finally satisfied—OK exhausted—we used them to heal sore muscles, bite-marks, butt cheeks red from spanking and various other minor injuries. Those regenerators are wonderful things and convenient for me to use in easing any areas that might have got a little sore from overuse.

No matter how well you lubricate, sometimes chaffing occurs.

The problem is that they are less convenient for people who keep their plumbing internal, like my wife. Not wanting her to suffer—OK, wanting her to be ready, willing and able for sex whenever we (I) felt like it—we'd collaborated on the design for a long, narrow regenerator that was combined with a vibrator. If things got a little out of hand and Deborah got uncomfortable, we could fix her problem quickly, and in a very pleasurable way.

When we finally decided that we needed to get back to the castle if we were going to have time for a bath before dinner, I noticed that she slipped her little friend into her jacket pocket.

It looked like we could be in for more fun later that night!

There were just the four of us for dinner, and once the table had been cleared and we were left in private, we brought each other up to date on our afternoon's activities.

No, not those activities. I don't need Jack and Angel to know what we get up to in our spare time.

Although I'm sure they know, as they do much the same.

Dammit.



I told Jack and Angel that the White Star was on its way to evacuate the IPX team, and they'd arrive in three days. Jack then told me that Shukar had been in touch about what he'd found up at the dig.

"The shuttle engine is shot to hell. He couldn't fix it with the parts he had on hand, so he's had to come back down to make what he needs. He thinks he can get it all done tomorrow, and he'll go back up the next day to finish the repairs. He asked the team if they wanted to come back with him and offered them accommodation on Serenity or here at the castle, but they refused. They don't want to leave the dig and the shuttle unattended."

Jack shook his head. "Scared but stubborn. Shukar told me they were down to their last couple of tins of food. It really pisses me off that IPX sends its people out so poorly equipped and leaves them so vulnerable. Can't the Rangers do something about that?"

He glared across the table at me and I shrugged helplessly. "They're a private corporation, as you well know, Jack. People don't have to go to work for them. The ISA tries to make sure that their employment contracts are fair, but the problem is that for archeologists, if they don't want to work in academic circles, or can't find jobs there, Inter-Planetary Expeditions is the only game in town. And the company knows it and treats its employees accordingly. Booji knows I had to listen to Max complain about them often enough, particularly about the lack of benefits like sick pay and paid vacations. I even offered to chip in for his vacation time once, just to get him to stop going on about it."

Jack laughed, obviously remembering the event, as at that time our timelines hadn't diverged.

Please don't ask me to explain how we were once the same person. It still makes my head hurt thinking about it.

He went on to brief us about the meeting he and Angel had attended that afternoon.

"The trader, Branool, had some pretty interesting things to show us. Nothing tangible, but plenty of pictures and descriptions. He says that he doesn't stock these things himself but can put us in touch with someone who does."

Jack leaned forward and frowned, "Matt, he had some really unpleasant items on his stock list. Disintegrators, shrapnel grenades that could shred a town, and bombs big enough to flatten a city but small enough to conceal in a pocket. We need to stop this trade as soon as we can. But according to him, it will take a couple of days for him to set up the meet with the dealer. So he says he'll be in touch with the details of where and when the day after tomorrow. There's not much more we can do until we hear from him again."

Jack sat back and his frustration was clear. Angel reached over and laid her hand on his arm, looking up into his face with a loving smile. "Don't worry, Jack, we'll fix this. We'll get to the bottom of it all and we'll stop it." She turned to me and smiled again, "Won't we, Matt? The Rangers will put a stop to this, won't they?"

I smiled back at her and nodded. "Of course we will, Angel. That's what we're here for. We stop the bad guys."

Angel laughed and blew me a kiss, then stood and pulled Jack's arm until he rose from his chair.

"Right, well if there's nothing we can do tomorrow, we'll have a day off. It's my birthday and I plan to stay in the castle and do nothing. Nothing except my husband that is." With one last naughty smile over her shoulder, Angel dragged Jack from the room.

Deborah gave one of her deep, throaty chuckles and said, "Shall we follow their example? Can we have a day off, too and only do each other?"

I stood up and pulled my wife into my arms. "Didn't you get enough this afternoon?"

Her pupils were dilated with passion as she whispered, "Never enough. I can never get enough of you, Matthew."

I played with the top button of the dress she was wearing, and said, "Maybe we could go to that pool and waterfall in the woods tomorrow? I'd like to do you there again."

Deborah shivered as she closed her eyes, remembering when we had spent an afternoon out by that pool on my second visit to Eriadne. She'd been four months pregnant with our first child at the time, but it hadn't slowed us down one little bit.

Then she opened her eyes and licked her lips, saying, "Speaking of pools, I had an idea earlier. Although to be fair, Angel thought of it first. I hope Kirrin has got things ready by now."

She refused to explain what she was talking about, just dragged me out of the dining room and up a couple of flights of stairs until we stood outside the door of Lily's rooms. I looked at her quizzically and said, "What are we doing here?"



Deborah flung the door open and pushed me inside. The lights were low, creating pools of warmth around the room, but leaving the central lounging pit in shadow. I could just make out that it was filled with furs and pillows, and I finally got the point.

I grasped Deborah's shoulders and turned her to face me, looking down at her high necked dress—black of course—that had buttons all down the front to the hem. I gave a slow smile and asked, "How much to do you like this dress? Can you replace it?"

She smiled back, but only said, "Do it, Matthew, do it." She knows me so well.

I grabbed the dress at the neck with both hands and ripped it apart, sending buttons flying around the room. Under it, my wife wore only her bra and her black stockings, neither of which stood between me and my goal.

I pushed hard and sent Deborah tumbling backwards into the pile of furs and cushions in the pit, then fell on top of her. She had, of course, landed with her legs spread wide, so I pushed my arms under her knees, and lifted her legs until they were over my shoulders, then I used one hand to hold her wrists above her head, effectively pinning her so she was unable to move.

I grinned down at her and said, "I'm coming in, ready or not." Using my other hand to guide me, I plunged into her. Hard and fast. Just how she likes it.

We eventually moved to the hot tub in Lily's bathroom, which Deborah complained was too shallow, as the water barely covered her tits when she sat on the shelf. I thought the view was perfect as the bubbling water showed peeks of her stiff nipples as it rippled across her breasts.

It was very late—or very early, depending on your point of view—before we dragged ourselves back to our rooms and fell into bed, utterly exhausted but very, very happy.

26th September 2288

We had a lazy day. Nothing we could do until either Branool made contact or the White Star arrived, so we decided to enjoy a vacation day. We had breakfast with Jack and Angel, who Deborah told me had plans for Lily's bathtub, so we'd have to clear out and leave them to it. I pouted a bit but eventually conceded that as it was Angel's birthday, she had first call on the pleasures of the bath.

We gave Angel the gift Deborah had chosen, and watched as she opened the small package. Inside were 3 bangles, one made of white gold, one of yellow gold and the final bangle of rose gold. On the inside of each was a tiny inscription. The first said, 'with love from Demon', the second 'with love from Matthew' and the third 'with love from Marcus and Mattie'.

Angel got a little emotional as she slid the bangles over her hand then flung herself into her sister's arms, hugging and thanking her. It was my turn for hugs and thanks next, which I thoroughly enjoyed, particularly as Jack was glaring at me hard enough to drill holes in my head. So I just hugged his wife a little harder and held her for a little longer than was strictly necessary.

After that we went our separate ways. I assume Jack and Angel went to Lily's bath, while Deborah and I went back to her rooms.

The doors onto the terrace were open as the weather had warmed during our stay, and the white voile curtains moved gently in the breeze. We were naked within seconds of our arrival and we spent the next few hours making love in every room and in every position we could think of. We did it in the living room, on the sofas and the coffee table. We did it in the bedroom, on the bed and on the floor. We did it in the bathroom in the shower and in the tub. And we did it on the terrace, having dragged the cushions off the sofas, under the brilliant blue sky, watched only by the avians circling high above us.

I can assure you I'd checked that the force fields which kept those brutes away from the castle were fully activated. I didn't want one of them coming down and biting my butt while I was in flagrante!

Later on, we packed a picnic and took one of the fly-bikes out into the woods, settling by the pond, where we made love again. In the water, out of the water, under the water and on the bike.

Deborah's own special regenerator got one hell of a workout that day. Maybe we should have brought another one with us, just in case this one dies from overuse.

I made love to Deborah in every place we'd ever made love on our previous visits to Eriadne. We renewed our vows to each other in our passion and our deep abiding love for each other. I can only hope we have another twenty years together, and in twenty years' time we'll be back to see if we can still make love in every place again.

Ana Clara, Frank, Harry, Kirrin, Kullkarren and Thikira joined us for Angel's birthday dinner and we got to see the gift Jack had bought her. He'd obviously been lying about having forgotten to get her anything as his present must have taken skilled craftspeople weeks of work.

It was a beautiful long red dress, with a golden bodice that displayed Angel's cleavage to perfection, making it almost impossible for me to drag my eyes away from it. She also wore an intricate gold necklace that must have cost a fortune—Jack's business was obviously doing well. Angel wore her hair up high on her head, exposing heavy gold earrings which drew attention to her long, elegant neck.

I don't think Angel has ever looked as beautiful as she did that night. She was a mature woman, confident and comfortable with herself, completely content with her life. Her happiness shone from her face as she explained the origin of the costume.

We all laughed as she told us about her love for an old 21st century TV program called Firefly, which featured a spaceship called Serenity. The dress and jewelry Angel wore were copied from those worn by one of the characters in that program, a woman called Inara.

I can't imagine any woman looking half as beautiful in that outfit as Angel did that night.



I noticed that before we sat down to eat, Deborah gave Angel another gift. It was long, narrow and beautifully gift wrapped. She whispered something to Angel, and they both started to giggle. I have my suspicions about the nature of that gift and I really can't tell you how much it pisses me off that Jack gets to benefit from that particular little piece of technology.

I also reminded myself to check the patent on the device we'd already registered with the ISA before Jack started exploiting the invention commercially as well as personally. My doppelganger is quite wealthy enough already, he doesn't need to make more money from an invention of mine. OK, mine and Deborah's.

And yes, the patent is in her name as she did most of the work on the design and development.

During dinner I remembered that on one of my previous visits, Deborah and I had made love in the castle kitchens. So in the middle of the night we snuck down there and did it again. On the counter tops and on the kitchen table.

Not very hygienic you might think, but we did clear up after ourselves.

And no tables were broken.

27th September 2288

It was late afternoon when we got the call. Shukar called Jack to tell him there was trouble up at the ruins. Until then, we'd just been waiting for Branool to contact him. Waiting and waiting.

Neither Jack nor I is good at waiting, so rather than play poker—which is frankly pointless as we both play the same way and we can read each other's tells—we decided to do something constructive. We dragged another couple of fly-bikes out of storage and set about getting them fit for use. There were some tools and spare parts kept with the bikes, so we had everything we needed except possibly the skillset to do the job quickly.

But we had lots of time, so we spread everything we needed out on the lawns in the castle court, and set to work. Deborah and Angel sat in the sun watching, making occasional comments about either our ineptitude or how good our butts looked when we bent over the bikes. I'm not sure which comments were more embarrassing but I knew that Deborah was going to get spanked later.

Which was exactly what she was aiming for, of course.

We got both bikes running smoothly and went back into the castle for a light lunch, then moved to the library to wait. Deborah and I took one of the sofas on the ground floor and got ourselves into our favorite position for reading. I sat back on the sofa with my legs spread wide, while Deborah sat sideways with her butt between my legs and her back against the sofa arm. I had a book in one hand which left my other hand free to wander. Deborah likes my wandering hand, even if it does usually end up drawn to her breasts like metal to a magnet.

Jack and Angel went up to the first floor balcony and took over one of the window seats. We couldn't see them, but we could hear them and from Angel's giggles, either she was reading a very funny book or Jack was amusing her in some other way. My money's on the latter.

The warmth and lack of sleep over the previous few days eventually took their toll and I awoke to the sound of Jack's voice calling me to wake up. For one confused half-asleep moment I thought I was back on the farm with my Gramps calling me because I was late for school, and then I woke up properly and shot to my feet.

Oops.

Deborah had ended up on the floor and she did not look happy about it.

I thought at first that Jack's trader had called him, but there was still no news on that front. But Shukar had called for help, as a mob of Brakiri had surrounded the IPX team's shuttle and he was now trapped inside it with them.

We all ran down to the courtyard where the four fly-bikes stood, ready to go. Jack flung himself onto one, and Angel onto another then the two of them lifted into the air, while I blocked Deborah who was approaching a third bike.

She looked at me quizzically as I held her back, saying, "I want you to stay here." I'd been doing some thinking as we ran and had made some plans. Plans to keep Deborah safe in the castle, but also to have her doing something important.

My wife looked furious and tried to push me aside but I held onto her shoulders. "Hear me out. I need you down here to organize things. We'll bring the archeologists back here and we need to keep them safe. Make sure we have accommodations and food ready then clear all the Brakiri out of the castle. Get Harry up here but for gods' sake make sure he leaves Baby on Serenity. Then work on how we can secure the castle against a possible attack. You know this place better than anyone so you're the best person for the job. We need eyes and ears on the entrances and I have no idea how to do that, so I need you to figure it out."

Deborah calmed as I spoke and by the end she was nodding and pushing me towards one of the remaining bikes. "Go. I'll have everything sorted for when you get back. Just come back in one piece."

I kissed her hard and fast, then swung myself into the saddle, started the bike and lifted off straight up until I was above the level of the walls. Then I put the bike into forward gear and rode like the devil to catch up with Jack and Angel.

We worked out a plan over the bikes' on-board Comms units as we rode and while neither Jack nor I was entirely happy with what we arranged, it was the best we could come up with. When we got to the ruins, we could see the mob gathered around the shuttle, which they were rocking back and forth. That took a lot of people as those shuttles are not light. If they succeeded in tipping it over the people inside would have a very rough ride. If they set fire to it, things could get very bad indeed.

Jack and I stayed high and drew our PPGs, firing down into any gaps we could find in the crowd. This had the desired effect of making many of them panic and scatter, opening up a space near the shuttle where Angel could descend. I say descend, but she damn near flew her bike into the ground, then bounced straight out of the saddle until she hung in the air a couple of meters above the mob.

The air shimmered around her so I knew that none of the weapons held by the Brakiri could hurt her; they couldn't get through the shield she'd raised around herself. She also looked damned scary. I'd seen her look like that on Eriadne once before, and she'd killed a Technomage single handed that day, which is an almost impossible thing to do. Her hair pulsed white then faded to black again, always with the white streak that ran from her forehead remaining. Her eyes were completely black as she channeled the power she needed to hopefully frighten but if necessary fight the mob.

The fifty or so Brakiri who were left in the crowd started to move away from Angel showing they weren't entirely stupid. If she hadn't been on my side I'd have been running for the hills. But some of



them were obviously made of sterner stuff as about a dozen of them started to move back, brandishing clubs, knives and a couple of nasty looking crossbows, trying to outflank Angel as she hovered in the air with her back to the shuttle.

Jack and I fired into the ground again from our vantage position high above. We stayed high not only to give Angel covering fire, but also so the crowd was less likely to recognize us. I was damned sure none of them would recognize Angel in her fiery avenging mode. Of course, the fly-bikes were a pretty good clue that we'd come from the castle, as there were very few of them around on Eriadne apart from those in storage there, but it was Jack and Angel's identities we wanted to protect, so they could continue to mislead their trader into believing they

were as criminal as him.

The warning shots had the desired effect and the last remnants of the mob scattered. We'd managed to disperse them without actually injuring any of them, but I suspect that a few of them ran home in wet and stained pants.

When there were no more Brakiri in sight, we dropped to the ground and waited until Angel had stopped hovering in midair and her hair and eyes had returned to normal. I was just about to call Shukar when Angel stopped me. "Just a minute, Matt. There's something you need to know. I recognized one of the Brakiri leading the attack. He's been hanging around Branool's offices every time we've been there. I think they might be related, as his name's Dagool. He has face tattoos, so he's probably a member of the Chadi."

Interesting. The Chadi is a Brakiri criminal fraternity. I wondered briefly how Angel knew so much about Brakiri criminal gangs then remembered that she'd lived down-below on Babylon 5 for a while. This was all beginning to come together. We definitely needed back-up from the Rangers if the Chadi were involved in looting the ruins on Eriadne.

Jack said, "That may be why Branool hasn't contacted me today. Maybe he and Dagool were up here protecting their interests." It made sense but we had more urgent matters to attend to right then, so we called Shukar to give him the all clear. The shuttle door opened and the ramp descended, followed quickly by three shaken Xenoarcheologists and a very irate looking Drazi.

Actually, Shukar looked much the same as usual, but Drazi always look angry. They can't help it. Probably because they're always angry.

It's a genetic thing.

Shukar advised us that he'd nearly finished the repairs when the mob showed up, waving weapons and threatening the IPX team. Nisrina's voice was shaky as she said, "They kept screaming about how we'd brought death and evil down on them. They said we had to join their dead and that the skies had given them a sign telling them we're evil. I have no idea what they were talking about, and they wouldn't listen when I tried to tell them that our arrival had nothing to do with the comet. That seemed to provoke them even more and they attacked. We only just made it back inside the

shuttle and got the landing ramp up before any of them could get in. I don't know what might have happened if you hadn't have got here when you did. I don't know how to thank you."

For a moment, I wondered just how much briefing IPX workers were given before they were sent out into the field. Being aware that speaking about a comet was considered to be completely taboo for the Brakiri might not be common knowledge, but you'd have thought anyone coming to a planet with a predominantly Brakiri population might have been warned. Just saying the word is considered an outright threat against the individual, his family and his water clan. The archaeologists had certainly managed to add fuel to the fire. It was no wonder the mob had attacked. But I suspected that some of them had just been looking for an excuse.

I sighed and said, "You can thank us by doing as we asked before, and coming back to the castle with us. We can protect you there."

Even now I could see Nisrina wavering. That woman had more courage than sense. "But what about the shuttle? That's all we have. Our research, our findings, our possessions, everything. We can't leave it unprotected!"

I looked over at Shukar. "How long to finish repairs?"

Shukar grunted. "Give me five minutes and I'll get it airborne for long enough to get it down to the spaceport. I can get my quadbike into the hold so I won't have to leave it up here." Fortunately, the mob had ignored Shukar's transport, which had been parked nearby, in their eagerness to attack the shuttle.

I nodded. "Go. We'll stay here with you until you're done, then you fly the shuttle to safety and batten down the hatches on Serenity. We'll take these people back to the castle and keep them safe there until we can work out how to calm everyone down."

Waiting for Shukar to finish fixing the shuttle felt like an eternity but in reality it only took a few minutes. Then he loaded his quad, took off and we followed on the bikes.

Jack had Nisrina behind him while Lowanna rode pillion with me. Hjalmar looked happy to be sitting behind Angel, but I'd heard Jack warn him to be careful where he put his hands on the ride back or he might lose them.

Little did Hjalmar know that it wasn't Jack he needed to worry about; Angel could take care of wandering hands herself, but her solution could leave the perpetrator with no hands at all.

As we approached the town, Shukar peeled off towards the spaceport while the rest of us dropped our bikes into the castle inner court where Deborah and Harry were waiting for us. Harry was holding the biggest PPG rifle I'd ever seen; bigger even than the one G'Tan used to carry. He was obviously taking his role of bodyguard very seriously, but I had every intention of taking over and guarding my wife's body zealously all by myself.

Deborah flung herself at me almost before I'd gotten off the bike, kissing me and hugging me so hard I nearly squeaked. Hardly the sort of sound her manly protector should make. When we came

up for air she whispered, "I plan a very close inspection later to make sure all your bits are still present and in their correct position."

Then before I could say anything, she turned, keeping her arm firmly around my waist, and addressed the group watching us, "OK, here's the plan. The castle is secured against ground attack. The only way in or out is via the front gate and that's closed and locked. I've had cots put in the guardroom by the gate and Harry can bunk there with Hjalmar."



She nodded at the Viking then went on. "Nisrina and Lowanna will be in my rooms. Matthew and I will be in the wedding suite. Angel and Jack, back to Angel's rooms please. Harry, can you show Nisrina and Lowanna up to my rooms, please?"

As soon as they'd left, Deborah turned to Angel. "Do you have your balls of sight with you?"

Angel nodded, for once lost for words at how Deborah had taken charge. I didn't blame her. I felt like coming to attention and saluting, and I could see Jack was standing up straight for once.

"Can you set them up to cover a particular area and then leave them so someone else can use them?"

I suddenly realized what Deborah was doing and started to grin.

Angel frowned for a moment then nodded again. "It will take me a little while to set up, but yes. Why?"

Demon smiled at her. "I'd like you to set one ball up in the guardroom with a view of the road leading up to the gate. Harry and Hjalmar can take shifts monitoring the road from there. Could you put another in the wedding suite, with a view of the inner court, please? Matthew and I will take turns covering that one. Keep the other ball in your room with you, please, and set it for viewing the main hallway. You and Jack can keep that part of the castle in view, just in case anyone gets over the castle walls."

My wife frowned a moment then said, "It's not likely they will, as now you're all back inside, I'll set the force fields to maximum, but just in case." She then turned to me and smiled, saying, "Have I missed anything? Oh yes, if anyone is hungry, there's a cold buffet set out in the dining room."

I started to laugh and pulled Deborah close, kissing her again, then said, "When we get back to Minbar I'm going to quit and you can be Entil'Zha. I think you'll do a better job than me."

She'd done everything I'd asked and solved the problem of keeping a lookout. I'd completely forgotten about Angel's balls of sight, although how I could do that after the game of Poltergeist she'd played on me once, I had no idea.

Deborah smiled up at me and said, "I don't want your job. I prefer to work under you."

She does indeed, but she likes to go on top sometimes, too.

Before I could remind her of this, Harry returned to the courtyard, still carrying his giant PPG. Deborah smiled at him and said, "Thank you, Harry. I really appreciate your help."

I could almost watch the big lump melt into a puddle at that smile, and I couldn't blame him. She makes my knees go weak when she smiles at me, too. She turned to Hjalmar and said, "I need your word that you'll never say a word about what you see here in the castle tonight, or we'll have to ask you to go inside with the other members of your team. I got the impression you would prefer to be useful. Was I right?"

Another giant of a man melted before my wife's hazel eyes and nodded like a puppet having his strings pulled. Hjalmar never stood a chance. So he and Harry went off to the guardroom by the gate, while the rest of us went indoors.

Jack and Angel offered to take trays of food up for Nisrina and Lowanna, after which Angel would do her 'magic' with her balls of sight. That left Deborah and me alone in the dining room. I nodded over at the buffet and asked, "How did you explain to Kirrin why we wanted the place to ourselves tonight? She was pretty insistent that she wanted to stay and look after us."

I felt a little guilty about having asked Deborah to get rid of all the Brakiri in the castle. I was sure Kirrin and Thikira could be trusted, and probably the others would have been fine, too. But if the townspeople had taken against the archeologists, I couldn't take the risk of being infiltrated.

Deborah frowned. "She didn't even question me when I suggested we just have a self-service buffet tonight and that everyone could have a night off. In fact she smiled and said she'd planned on proposing something along those lines herself, as tonight it was important that everyone got to spend time with their families and then alone in contemplation."

My wife looked up at me, obviously puzzled. "There's something damned odd going on around here, Matthew, and I think it's coming to a head tonight. We'll need to keep a careful watch. No distractions." She swatted my hand away from where it had accidentally wandered up her thigh and under her dress. Look, sometimes my hands have a life of their own, OK?

"OK, we'll take it in turns to nap, but why have you put the women in our rooms rather than in the wedding suite? Surely they'd have been just as safe there?"

Deborah shook her head. "We don't know who prepared those rooms before we arrived. Once we brought the IPX team back here, they could easily guess that we'd put them in rooms that were already made up. It would take just one person in that mob today to know that those rooms were ready and if the mob gets past our defenses, they'd go straight there. I think it's very unlikely they'll manage that, but if they do, they'll find us waiting for them."

My sweet natured wife drew an enormous dagger from under her skirt and waved it at me with an evil grin. I have absolutely no idea how she had concealed such a large weapon under there, and I don't think I want to know. When she'd done intimidating me, she slipped it back wherever she'd been keeping it. I decided that I might just be safer keeping my hands to myself for a while, if I wanted to keep my hands attached to my arms. So I told her that her plan was brilliant, but did so from a distance.

OK, so my wife scares me sometimes. If she doesn't scare you, then you haven't been paying attention.

Jack and Angel came back just then, and moved over to the buffet to start filling their plates. They joined us at the table, and Angel spoke between mouthfuls of food.

"The ball of sight is set up in the wedding suite for you, just as you asked, Demon. It gives you a full view of the inner court. No shadows or blank spots. I've also got mine set up in my spell room, with a wide angle view over the entrance hall. Once I've eaten, I'll take the last one down to the guardroom. Jack will come with me and we'll take some food down for Harry and Hjalmar, then we'll come back up and start surveillance."

She looked quizzically at Deborah. "How did you guess I'd have my balls of sight with me?"

Deborah laughed, "Because you always do. You never travel without them if you can avoid it. Face it, Angel, you're nearly as nosy as our husbands."

Angel spluttered something about pots and kettles, then finished her food, loaded up a couple of trays with a small mountain of food—Harry and Hjalmar were both big men with big appetites after all—and left the dining hall with Jack in tow.

After they'd left, I turned to Deborah and said, "You seem pretty sure that something bad's going to happen tonight."

My wife nodded and looked at me carefully, "I am. So are you. By the pricking of my thumbs..."

I nodded back and mentally continued, [Something wicked this way comes].

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