

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

by The Space Witches



*Orange juice*

## *Chapter 7*

28th September 2288

Matthew Gideon

*Deborah and I stood holding each other tightly, not speaking, not moving, just wanting to touch and be touched. I would happily have stood there, just holding my wife as close as I could, for the rest of the day. Waves of love and sorrow washed over me, and I felt Deborah's tears on my neck as she rested her head against me. Deborah presents a façade to the world of being cool, controlled and detached. But in private, my wife is a very emotional woman; I love the fact that she's always trusted me enough to allow me to see that side of her.*

*I leaned back a little and lifted her chin to look into her eyes, asking, "Who was it?"*

*She knew what I meant without asking and answered quietly, "My mother."*

*That explained the sorrow, but I would have expected anger, too. I know how my wife feels about her mother, and she has good reason, but this wasn't the time or place to go into that. Before I could speak, Deborah looked up at me and asked, "And you?"*

*I debated delaying my response, but decided to get it over with. "Galen."*

*I really wasn't sure how Deborah would react to that. She has good reason to hate Galen; he nearly killed her, after all. To my surprise, she just sighed and whispered, "If he wanted forgiveness, I suppose that's progress at least. He must have acknowledged that what he did was wrong. As my mother did."*

*Before I could reply my commlink went off. Why does the universe never give me a break? Just when I needed a little private time with my wife, there was always someone else wanting my attention. I hesitated but Deborah said, "Answer it. We need to know what's going on."*

*She was right of course. We'd been cut off from the world as well as each other overnight, and could only hope that the quietness in the castle and the lack of motion in the inner court—still visible through the 'window' Angel had set up—meant that nothing disastrous had happened.*



*I lifted my wrist and spoke into my link.  
"Gideon. Go."*

*Hjalmar's voice came through sounding relieved. "I've been trying to contact you all night. What's been going on in there? All we could see were weird red and black wavy fields over every door."*

*"I'll update you later, but everyone is fine." I mentally crossed my fingers and went on, "In the meantime, what's going on outside? Any sign of intruders overnight?"*

*"Nothing. Just after I spoke to you, all the people in the town disappeared into their homes. It's been as quiet as the grave ever since."*

*Hjalmar had no idea how accurate his simile was. He went on, "But now there's someone approaching the gate. It's the woman who seems to be in charge up here. Kirrin, is it? Shall we let her in?"*

*It was obvious that Hjalmar at least had received no nocturnal visitation, and I guessed that meant Harry had had a quiet night too. Probably because they'd been together in the guard room. It seemed that ghosts liked the people they visited to be alone. I guess it saved complications as two ghosts at once could be confusing. Hell, just the one apparition had been bewildering enough for me.*

*"Let Kirrin in, but no one else. I'm coming down." I cut the link and turned to Deborah, who had that soft smile on her face that showed she was linking to her sister. I waited a second and her expression changed as she came back to me.*

*"Angel and Jack are fine. They had their own visitors, but they'll tell us about them later. Angel is very happy about something, so I suppose her ghost was welcome."*

*I nodded and kissed her gently on the lips. "I need to go down and see Kirrin. Can you go see how our IPX ladies are doing? If they got separated overnight, they could be distressed, and you're the best person to calm them. Also, it's probably about time we told them who we really are. Knowing*

*they're under the protection of the Rangers should reassure them. Can you tell them to stay in their rooms, and we'll have some food sent up soon? Oh, and let them know we'll lift the force field now it's daylight, so they can use the terrace."*

*Deborah nodded, and after one last lingering kiss, she left the room with me following. We split at the top of the stairs with her going up while I descended into the main hallway, which was empty and silent. It looked like we'd got away without any attempted intrusions overnight.*

*I unlocked and opened the main door to find Kirrin waiting outside. She smiled at me as I waved her in, closing and locking the door behind her. She followed me into the dining room and sat next to me at the large table. She smiled again as she asked, "Did you have an interesting night, Captain Gideon?"*

*I shook my head and smiled back. "Just Matt, you know that, Kirrin. It's been a long time since I was a Captain. And yes, it was an interesting night. How about you?"*

*Kirrin nodded, that half-smile still lingering around her lips. "Of course. The tradition is that we must be alone by sunset, so we can receive our guests. To some they bring great happiness, to others terrible sorrow, but we are always wiser for their company. It is a great gift to be alive at the time of the Day of the Dead. We are all grateful."*

*I wasn't so sure about that. Frankly, I could have done without my previous night's experience. Maybe it's because I'm not a Brakiri. Or maybe it's because I'm a cynical, suspicious, double-dealing, second guessing, ruggedly handsome skeptic.*

*You don't have to comment.*

*No, really. Don't. Fine, if you don't believe me, go ask my wife. She'll assure you that I'm both rugged and handsome.*

*I took a deep breath and briefed Kirrin on how she could help us that day. I'd spent the previous night formulating some plans, and Kirrin's co-operation was vital.*

*"Kirrin, can you check on anyone arriving at the gates? I'll have a guard there at all times, but I don't want to turn people away unnecessarily. If you'll vouch for them, that's fine by me. If you're sure they weren't involved in the trouble up at the ruins and they're not a danger to the IPX team then let them in."*

*Kirrin nodded and gave another of her elegant half-smiles, "Of course. Now, shall I make a start on getting some breakfast ready for you and your guests? It may be a little while before any of the usual staff join us, as they will also have had *interesting* nights."*

*I couldn't help but laugh at her emphasis. "Thank you. That would be incredibly kind of you. I know it's an imposition, but could you prepare enough for twelve? And could you contact Kullkarren and ask him to join us? I'm going to ask two of the Serenity crew to come up to the castle and I'd like you and Kullkarren to sit down with us, too. There are things we need to tell you and things we need to plan for the day. I hope that's OK with you?"*

*Kirrin rose from her seat and gave me a graceful bow as she said, "It would be my pleasure..." she hesitated for a moment, then smiled again, "...Matt. I'll make a start and I should have everything ready quite soon, perhaps more quickly if any of the kitchen staff arrive."*

*I thanked her again and said, "I'll get Hjalmar to call you on the Comm system if and when anyone turns up to help." She started to leave and gave another graceful bow to Deborah, who came through the doors just as Kirrin was leaving.*

*Deborah bowed her head and reached out to touch Kirrin on the arm, saying softly, "I'm glad your visitor brought you happiness, Kirrin."*

*Kirrin laughed again, and broke into a wide smile. "You can feel my joy, can't you, Lady Demon? It was wonderful to see my brother again, having lost him so many years ago. You remember...?" She trailed off and Deborah nodded.*

*"Of course. He was a good man who left us too soon."*

*With that, Kirrin left and Deborah came over to join me, sighing as she sat down next to me. I asked, "What happened to Kirrin's brother? You knew him?"*

*Deborah nodded. "He was one of the guards here at the castle. Nikarran was his mentor and his friend. Rimrikkin was also a hunter and there was an accident in the forest. One of the avians attacked him. He died on the way back to the castle, so Angel couldn't help him. There was nothing any of us could do."*

*I winced, remembering how Harry's brother's body had looked when he was found after an avian attack. He'd obviously died in agony. Not a good way to go. I shook my head to remove those memories and asked my wife, "How are Lowanna and Nisrina? Did they have visitors last night or did they stay together?"*



*"They got separated. Nisrina had gone to bed, but Lowanna had stayed in the living room, reading, when the sun went down. They both had visitors, but they didn't tell me much about them. All I can say is that Nisrina was happy, while Lowanna was rather subdued and sad. There doesn't appear to be any way to tell if you'll get a good ghost or a bad one. It seems to depend on which ghost from your past needs to see you the most. I wish..."*

*I took Deborah's hand and squeezed it gently as she stopped speaking, waiting for her to continue, but she shook herself and said, "Enough. You know what they say about wishes." She smiled at me and said, "You feel very determined this morning. Have you been making plans?" My wife*

*knows me so well.*

*I quickly outlined what I intended to do that day, then made a call down to Serenity, asking Ana Clara and Frank to join us in the castle for breakfast and listing a few items I needed them to bring with them. They reported that all had been quiet in the spaceport overnight and that they'd seen no ghosties, Ghoulies or things that go bump in the night, although they said that Shukar had been unusually truculent that morning. I wondered briefly how they could tell the difference from his normal demeanor but decided not to push the issue.*

*Kirrin came back shortly afterwards, carrying dishes to the sideboard, so Deborah and I helped her arrange them then followed her down to the kitchen and assisted her with the rest of the preparations for breakfast.*

*OK, I made the coffee. And toast. Even I can't ruin toast.*

*Yes, I know I can burn it. I proved that to everyone's satisfaction that morning. But I make damned good coffee and I squeezed a lot of the oranges we'd brought with us from Serenity, so I wasn't totally useless.*

*Not another word from you, please.*

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*I looked around the table where I'd gotten everyone seated to my satisfaction. In case you wondered, that meant Frank Clayton was sitting as far away from my wife as possible.*

*The bastard had made a beeline for her as soon as he'd arrived, bowing over her hand and kissing it. I was outraged when I realized that Deborah was not only blushing but she was enjoying the attention. I swear she was fluttering her eyelashes and making googly eyes at him. I decided that we'd need words later about how flirting with other men, particularly younger, devilishly handsome men, was not acceptable behavior. I was the only man who was allowed to melt my Ice Queen!*

*While Frank was paying his odious attentions to my wife, Ana Clara produced the items I'd asked for from the ship. She looked puzzled and said, "I'm not quite sure what you want with these, but here they are."*

*I looked down at what she was holding and grinned. "Perfect. Hold onto a few of them, as you may need them later yourself." Giving no further explanation, I moved to extricate Deborah from Frank's grasp and sat down at the table. Deborah was sitting to my right with Jack and Angel the other side of her, Harry sitting beyond Angel. Kirrin sat to my left with Kullkarren next to her, then Ana Clara and Frank. With his wife on one side of him and Harry on the other, there was no danger of Frank's hands wandering where they didn't belong.*

*I don't think Harry is Frank's type. Although I've been wrong before, so you never know.*

*I'd had food sent down to Hjalmar who was still guarding the gate and trays had been taken up to Nisrina and Lowanna. I didn't want any of the IPX people listening in on my plans for the day. Angel had Baby sitting on her knee, as much to my annoyance, Ana Clara and Frank had brought him up from the ship with them. My fault. I should have been specific about them leaving him behind. Now I had one more thing to think about. How was I going to keep Baby out of the way*



*and safe? I knew I'd never get Angel's cooperation if her dog wasn't taken care of, and Angel was essential to my planning.*

*Once everyone had finished eating, I brought the meeting to order and started the briefing.*

*"There are a few things that I haven't been completely open about with you all, and you now need to know the full picture." If they believed I planned to tell them everything they didn't know their Entil'Zha very well, did they?*

*What I did tell everyone was how the ancient weapons had been appearing on the black market in recent months, and how I'd suspected they might come from Eriadne, so I'd had a hidden agenda in visiting the planet. Only Kirrin and Kullkarren looked shocked; I suspect Ana Clara and Frank had figured things out a while back. Harry just looked confused.*

*Confused is Harry's default setting.*

*I turned to the Claytons and said, "I need to be sure that nothing else is looted from the ruins. Could you two arm yourselves, take the fly-bikes and go up there with Harry? If there are people already there and you can't handle them, then call for reinforcements. Otherwise, get yourselves dug in and make sure no one can get past you. Record everything you find and take samples of any hairs, skin, scales, bodily fluids or anything else you can find, so we can use them for DNA testing later. Take enough supplies to last you until the morning. White Star 147 should arrive around midnight so I'll send a relief up soon after."*

*I could see Jack bristling at me giving commands to his crew, but a deal was a deal. We were planet side, so I was in command. Kirrin led the Claytons down to the kitchens for supplies while Harry left to prepare the fly-bikes and get a suitable array of weapons from the guardroom.*

*After they'd all gone I turned to Kullkarren. "I want you here with Kirrin to witness what happens today, Kullkarren. That means you're going to see things that I'd rather you didn't report to anyone beyond present company. I'm relying on your discretion." The young Brakiri nodded so violently I thought his head might fly off. I went on, "I'm sure when you were growing up you'll have heard stories about things the sisters could do when they lived here. Today you'll see some of those things, as well as some things you *haven't* heard about before. This is the first of many tests you'll have to pass to be a Ranger. You have to learn to be discrete."*

*Do NOT ask me how we teach that lesson to Drazi Rangers. Just accept that it's a long and painful process for everyone involved but no sentient lifeforms are harmed.*

*Except for the occasional Drazi.*

*Kirrin had rejoined us while I was speaking and leaned forward to reassure me. "I would trust Kullkarren with my life, Entil'Zha." She'd gone all formal on me again, but I guess that was better than Captain. Having two Captain Gideons in the room—and let's not forget Captain Denier-Gideon was present, too—would just confuse everyone as well as being more than the universe could easily stand without tearing itself into teeny tiny pieces.*

*I nodded and continued with the briefing. "First and foremost I should explain that the Rangers have no jurisdiction over Eriadne. I can't just descend from the skies, arrest someone who I think is a*

*smuggler and take them away to Ranger jail. For one thing, the Rangers don't have a jail and second, the Brakiri would create the biggest stink since the Nabulans all breathed out at the same time. So we have to get creative here."*

*That raised a few eyebrows around the table, but it shouldn't really have surprised anyone. The Anla'Shok is not a police force and the Inter-Stellar Alliance does not operate under a single judicial code. Since the formation of the ISA, the Rangers have become the means to create peace; patrolling the borders of member worlds and making sure that if one race plans to attack another, everyone would know about it. We have no powers of arrest or prosecution; we're just nosy tell-tales. Well, maybe not *just* that. We can get quite aggressive about peace-keeping should the need arise.*

*I went on, "If any crimes have been committed by stealing artifacts from the ruins, they would have to be prosecuted under Brakiri law. And frankly, I don't want the government on Brakir involved in this. I'm not convinced they'd see the looting as a crime and they'd almost certainly want access to the weapons. So even if we can catch the people responsible, I want this dealt with locally. Hence our need for Kirrin and Kullkarren as witnesses to whatever we do here. Is that understood?"*

*I got slow nods from everyone sitting at the table then Kirrin spoke up. "I agree. If there is a crime committed here on Eriadne, we will deal with it here. We do not want Brakir involved any more than you do. They have interfered here too much in recent years for our liking. Most colonists came here to get away from the rule of our government. We wanted to make something new, away from the commercial interests that rule everyone on Brakir and away from the crime syndicates."*

*She looked irate as she continued, "If anyone has been stealing artifacts from the ruins here on Eriadne and selling them off planet, our Elders will be very angry. No one has the right to take from the ruins, just as they have no right to take from the castle. These places are deemed to be community property and any benefits that flow from them should be made available to all; that is our law. If individuals have broken this law, they should be detained and taken to the Elders for punishment. That is our right and our duty."*

*I could have cheered. That was exactly what I'd hoped for. I asked quietly, "If we can prove that certain individuals have broken this law, Kirrin, and present them to the Elders, with you and Kullkarren as witnesses to their confessions, what action would the Elders likely take?"*

*This was important. I couldn't afford for the guilty parties to be given a rap over the knuckles and be set free to go back to smuggling and looting.*

*Kirrin looked grim, her face set into an expression of anger I'd never seen from this kindly woman before. "Theft of community property is one of the most serious crimes in our colony. It is considered second only to murder. If the evidence is clear then the guilty would be given a choice. Death or the mind-wipe. That is the law of the colony."*

*I saw Angel flinch and I knew this discussion must be painful for her. She had, after all, been subjected to a trial on Mars and threatened with mind-wiping herself many years before. I'd had to bust her out of jail to make sure she wasn't convicted of a crime she didn't commit. It had, of course, been my fault she was in jail in the first place but that's a long story and now isn't the time to tell it. Angel had always hated the concept of mind-wiping as a result of her experiences and I suspected that Deborah felt the same, but if so, she kept her opinion to herself.*

*I nodded in response to Kirrin's words. "I thought that might be the case. But I'll only agree to send someone before the Elders if we have compelling evidence of their guilt. Are we all agreed on that?"*

*I got nods from around the table. Strictly speaking, I didn't need their agreement. As Entil'Zha it's my job to keep the peace and stopping illegal weapons getting into the black market falls well within my remit. But I wanted everyone to know that I would not—and never will—present anyone for prosecution for committing a capital crime without being absolutely certain that they're guilty. And we still had a long way to go before we had hard evidence.*

*"OK, then there's not much more we can do until Branool makes contact with Jack and Angel. Although if he hasn't been in touch by this evening, we may have to move things along and I'll ask Jack to try and connect with him to see what's going on."*

*Jack nodded his agreement. "We want things tidied up here before the White Star arrives if possible. If Branool hasn't called by sunset, I'll track him down. Now come on, Matt, tell us exactly what you have planned for when we meet up with him."*



*Before I could respond, Kirrin raised her hand to interrupt. "Just a moment. You had not previously told us who you suspected of looting our heritage. Now you have named an individual. Can I confirm that Branool is your main suspect? And does his relative Dagool also fall under suspicion?"*

*I waved at Jack to answer the question. He said, "Yes to both questions. Branool has shown us inventories of weapons he has for sale, which include items completely unknown to the ISA. They*

*look like Shadow Tech, which is why we believe that he's been looting the ruins. He claims that there's another party involved and he's just the middle man, but I'm not sure I believe him. The IPX team has confirmed they've seen signs of digging up at the ruins outside the area they've been investigating."*

*I held up my hand when I saw Kirrin's fierce expression and her anger at what Jack had said. "Look, I know you and your people haven't been happy about the work the IPX people have been doing, but they've taken nothing from the site. They've just examined and recorded. We can make all their findings available to you so you can be satisfied that nothing has been stolen from your community property."*

*Kirrin nodded then said, "I will hold you to that, Entil'Zha. But you should know something about Branool and his cousin. They belong to a water clan that has long been associated with the Chadi. You know of this group?"*

*We all nodded, being familiar with the Brakiri crime syndicate. Kirrin went on, "We were not happy when Branool and his associates first came to Eriadne, but we could do nothing to keep them out. Brakir had decided our colony required expansion and we were not consulted about the new people they sent here. Most were hard workers looking for new opportunities, but a few, like Branool and*



*his cronies, were always interested in maximizing profits while minimizing efforts. This is not the Brakiri way. We pride ourselves on success through hard work.*

*"Many of the original colonists belong to the same water clan as Kullkarren and me. And the majority of the Elders are part of that same clan. They would therefore look favorably on any evidence you can provide of Branoöl breaking our laws and defying our customs."*

*That certainly could make life a lot easier if we could get the evidence needed, but we had a long way to go before we were at that stage. I thanked Kirrin and turned back to Jack. "Is there anything you can do between now and making contact with Branoöl to prepare yourselves?"*

*Jack shook his head. "Just rest. Neither Angelique nor I got any sleep last night. I'd prefer to be fresh for any meeting with Branoöl. So tell us what you want to happen at this meeting."*

*So I told them. And it came as no surprise that Jack went ballistic.*

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*When I finally climbed into bed it was close to noon.*

*It had taken a while to scrape Jack down from the ceiling, during which time he'd made the mistake of saying that he wouldn't allow Angel to take part in anything that exposed her to danger. That, of course, got Angel annoyed. Maybe annoyed isn't quite the right word. Perhaps incandescent with rage would be better. So she'd told Jack in no uncertain terms that she would decide for herself what she would and wouldn't do, and that he had no say in the matter.*

*You would have thought that after eight years of marriage, Jack would have learned that forbidding his wife from doing something is not a good idea. It's likely to make her more determined to do whatever it is he doesn't want her to do.*

*And if you'd like to think that I'd foreseen Jack's reaction to my plan, and also Angel's reaction to Jack, then perhaps you know your Entil'Zha quite well after all. My wife certainly gave me some very suspicious glances.*

*Kirrin and Kullkarren watched the matrimonial spatting with open mouths, having never seen one of Angel and Jack's head to heads before. The outcome was utterly predictable; Angel was going to do exactly what I needed her to do.*

*Things had just quietened down when my commlink sounded and Ana Clara came through. She reported that all was quiet at the ruins. The place had been deserted when they'd arrived, so they'd left Harry on guard, while she and Frank had recorded all the digging that had taken place. They'd even got underground into what looked like a storeroom of some sort, where unidentified objects of various kinds had been gathered for crating. They'd found hair and skin samples on the artefacts and crates, which we could use for DNA testing. Having done that, they'd set up a defensive position and were now dug in until they could be relieved. I thanked Ana Clara for the report and mentally ticked one more item off my list of things that needed doing that day.*

*Once Ana Clara had signed off, Kullkarren, Jack and I left the women to clear up the dining room, while we made our way to the throne room. No, we weren't being sexist. To be honest, Angel would*

*have been more use to us than Kullkarren, but we all knew that the best place for Angel just then was with her sister and her puppy, well away from her husband, while she calmed down.*

*Jack and I are not scared of our wives really. No, honestly, we're not. We just know when retreat is the best strategy. They teach that in Earthforce Academy. Really. They do teach it. It's in the 'How to Stay Alive when You're a Captain' class.*

*So it was left to the three weak and feeble men to man-handle one of the thrones down into the crypt below the castle. Those chairs were damned heavy and it took our joint efforts to move just one of them, which was exactly what I'd hoped. Having moved the throne into the middle of the crypt, I dropped the items Ana Clara had brought for me onto the seat then we made our way back up to the throne room.*

*This time, Jack and I carried a screen down, while Kullkarren brought a smaller chair with him. We set the screen up between the throne and the door, placing the smaller chair on the far side of the screen from the throne.*

*Jack and I then set up cameras that Frank and Anna Clara had brought up from Serenity around the crypt, all pointing at the throne, so that anything happening there could be viewed and recorded. We left one camera spare for later use. Kullkarren had left us while we did this and I'd expected to find him in the kitchen with the women, but when Jack and I had got there, only Kirrin awaited us.*



*"Kullkarren insisted that he was rested enough to take over watching the main gate while your IPX friend got some rest," she told us. "Lady Demon went with Kullkarren and will show the man to a room where he can sleep." She looked at me and smiled. "She said she will await you in the wedding suite."*

*Turning to Jack, Kirrin went on, "Lady Angel is waiting for you in her rooms."*

*I wondered if Angel would have forgiven Jack by the time he got there, and silently hoped that she wouldn't. Yes, I know, that makes me a mean, jealous bastard. I've learned to live with it. You should, too.*

*So Jack and I left the kitchens after having given our thanks to Kirrin yet again for everything she was doing for us. Jack disappeared up the stairs while I made a quick trip to the armory, then down to the crypt and back up again. I turned to the right at the top of the main staircase for the corridor leading to the wedding suite. I was almost glad we were using those rooms as it saved me climbing another flight of stairs up to Deborah's rooms. As I walked, I smiled as I imagined what might await me.*

*I was whistling happily—and tunelessly—to myself as I threw open the door to the suite only to find the living room empty. I broke into a grin as I strode across the room to the bedroom door, and opened it silently. The room was in darkness, the heavy drapes having been drawn across the large*

*windows, so I reached for the light switch. What I saw then was everything I'd hoped for and deeply disappointing at the same time.*

*My wife was sprawled on her back on the bed, her arms and legs spread wide, stark naked except for a leather holster and a very large knife strapped to her right thigh. She was also snoring. Loudly.*

*I'd obviously taken too long about my chores and my wife had fallen asleep. So I did what any considerate husband would do. First, I turned off the main light and switched on the smaller lamp by the side of the bed. Next, I carefully removed the holster and knife from her thigh. Just for her comfort of course; nothing to do with me not liking sharp objects in that area. Then I silently removed my clothing, and very carefully climbed onto the bed between Deborah's legs. Just the sight of her lying there had brought me to stiff attention and despite being pretty much exhausted from lack of sleep, there was one part of me that was raring to go.*

*Carefully maneuvering myself into position, I started to gently push inside her, going deeper with each slow thrust. Deborah's breathing faltered as she started to rouse, and I watched as her mouth opened and she licked her lips. Her eyes opened as I entered her fully and she smiled, whispering, "Matthew."*

*At least she got the name right. There would have been hell to pay if she'd said 'Frank'.*

*She went on, "That's my favorite way to be woken up. I hope you're not too tired to finish what you've started."*

*I kissed her deeply then proceeded to demonstrate that I was never too tired for that, although I have to admit that half way through we rolled over and Deborah went on top. When we finished, we fell asleep so quickly, she was still lying on top of me and I was still deep inside her. I don't think I've ever slept as soundly as I did that afternoon.*

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*Yes, you guessed it. I was woken by my commlink. Why does the universe hate me? I admit that I was rather hot, and my breathing was a little labored, but that was a small price to pay for waking up with my wife fast asleep, still straddling me. If it hadn't been for that damned commlink it was entirely possible that it would have been my turn to be woken up the way I like best.*

*But duty called and Booji knows that I'm a martyr to duty, so I pushed my wife off my chest, reached out for my commlink and muttered into it, "Fuck off."*

*The laughter from the other end was utterly evil. Do I laugh like that? I'm sure I don't. But my doppelganger certainly does, as it was Jack calling. His next words brought me to instant consciousness. "Branoole called. The meeting is on. His warehouse at sunset."*

*That barely gave us time to bathe, get clean clothes on and get down to the dining room to meet with Jack and Angel before they left. I told Jack we'd see him in an hour, then poked my wife—no, not like that. Well, not immediately anyway—until she woke up, grumbling.*

*I told her what was happening, then went through to the bathroom and started hot water running into the tub. Deborah walked in a few moments later, rubbing her eyes and yawning. If there is any*

*more glorious sight in the universe that my wife, naked and ready for her bath, I'm damned if I can think of it. Botticelli's Venus is nothing in comparison. Deborah has a much better body.*

*We made enough time for a little soapy fun, just to wake ourselves up, then dried ourselves and threw our clothes on, arriving in the dining room just behind Jack and Angel for once.*



*Angel was busy setting up one of her balls of sight, while Jack was moving chairs into position around the table. Deborah and I grabbed a chair each and helped, by which time Angel had finished. There was now a 'window' hanging over the center of the table, through which we could see down into the crypt. Everything was now staged, ready for my plan to be put into effect.*

*I'd been expecting to see Baby with Angel, so asked where he was.*

*Angel laughed, "I thought you and Demon might be a bit too busy to Baby-sit, so I took him up to Nisrina and Lowanna. They said they'd be happy to keep him with them, and he can play on the terrace up there." She glanced over at her sister and grinned. "Don't worry; I took poop bags up with me so you won't have to clear up your terrace later."*

*That was a relief at least. Having cleaned up after Oscar every time I walked him, I didn't need to deal with Baby's shit, too. Why do you think I let my wife do most of the dog-walking?*

*Deborah and I walked down to the main entrance where Kullkarren came out of the guardroom to help unbar the gate. We all wished Jack and Angel luck before they set off. I got to shake Jack's hand while Deborah gave Angel a hug, which left me feeling short-changed. I looked Jack in the eyes and said, "Thank you for doing this. If there was another way..."*

*He didn't let me finish. "This gives us the best chance of getting the evidence we need. I want those weapons out of circulation as much as you do. I'd prefer to go in with a PPG but we know that won't happen. So I have my secret weapon instead." He pulled Angel close to his side and smiled down at her. The look she gave him as she returned his smile had me gritting my teeth.*

*Deborah said softly, "Be safe. You're far more important than any weapons or evidence," and much to my annoyance gave Jack a gentle kiss on the cheek. That gave me permission to kiss Angel goodbye, and if I missed her cheek and caught her on the mouth, that was a complete accident, OK?*

*Why do I get the feeling you don't believe me? Don't answer that.*

*Jack and Angel turned away, and I put my arm around my wife's shoulders, pulling her to my side as we watched them walk down the hill. "They'll be fine," I said as the couple reached the first houses. "Angel is more powerful now than she's ever been. You should have seen her up at the ruins. She was incredible."*

*Deborah turned and looked up at me with worried eyes. "I know. I just hope she can control all that power. Lily and I have been working with her to help her contain her abilities and I know that Alwyn has been teaching her some Technomage techniques but..." She trailed off, unable to put her fears into words.*

*I smiled, trying to reassure her—or myself possibly. "You can link to her and help her at any time, can't you? She promised to link to you as soon as she's done what's needed. You can help her then, if she needs it."*

*I told myself Deborah was worrying unnecessarily. Angel had been able to keep a lid on her powers up at the ruins. I was sure she could do the same now.*

*I hoped.*

*We helped Kullkarren lock up again, then made our way down to the crypt and waited. And waited.*

*I wondered whether this would be a good time to talk about the previous night's visitors, but decided against it. We didn't need any distractions from what lay ahead.*

*It seemed like an eternity before Deborah's eyes closed and she breathed, "She's coming."*

{Chapter 7} {[Chapter 8](#)} {[Chapter 9](#)} {[Chapter 10](#)} ([Epilogue](#))

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## Homecoming

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

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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