

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

by The Space Witches



Tuzanor

Chapter 1

August 2288

Matthew Gideon



*Have I ever told you just why I love my wife? Apart from the fact that she's still as gorgeous as she was the day I first set eyes on her? And the fact that she's smart and funny? And even more importantly, she's deluded enough to think that I'm smart and funny, too? Yes, she has all that going for her, but she also *really* likes making love with me. I mean, really, REALLY likes it. A lot.*

Every morning these days, I wake up having had a good night's sleep. Now for me, that's quite something. I've never been a good sleeper, but since I've been married, I've got better and better at it. I no longer get up two or three times a night, prowling my room, waiting for exhaustion to set in so I can snatch another hour or so. These days, I sleep right through and

the first thing I see when I wake up is Deborah. Which is a damned good way to start the day. And it gets better when she wakes up too because then we make love. Which is an even better way to start the day.

Are you surprised that these days I tend to be in a good mood most of the time? Not so much the grouchy, guilt-ridden, hair-trigger tempered Captain I once was. More of the calm, even-tempered Entil'Zha I now am. And that's mostly due to the fact that since we moved to Minbar and I took up my new position, I haven't spent a single night away from my wife. If I travel, she comes with me—double meaning entirely intentional. As an empath, Deborah is an essential part of my team, telling me how people feel. Having her with me all the time means that I sleep well and get lots of sex. Lots and lots of sex. Both of those things are good for my temper and well-being, and also for the well-being of all the people who have to put up with me.

On this particular day in August 2288, I awoke to the smell of hot coffee and the touch of a rather cold wife snuggling up against me. Somewhat counterintuitively, I pulled Deborah's chilled body closer to me, whispering, "Why are you so cold?"

Snuggling tighter against me, and twining one leg around me, she murmured back, "I went to get you coffee and the heating hadn't come on. It must have gone really cold last night."

I mentally kicked myself as I realized that it was all very well living in the Entil'Zha's residence, with all the latest technological innovations, but none of that was much use if we didn't remember to turn it on! Deborah went on, "The heating's on now, so it will soon warm up in here."

I slid my arm down her back until my hand was resting on her butt and I started to caress her. "I can think of a quicker way to warm up."

My wife gave one of her deep, throaty chuckles, which I could feel where her breasts rested against my chest. "So can I. Drink your coffee."

I laughed softly and reached out for the mug that rested next to my bed. It was hot and strong; the perfect way to start a cold day. Well, maybe the second most perfect way. Once I'd drained the mug, I rolled over to face Deborah and to pull her more tightly against me. I kissed her cheek and said softly, "I'm warmer now, but still a bit chilled."

Deborah chuckled again and pushed me onto my back, saying, "All of you? Or just one part?"

Before I could answer she started kissing her way down my chest, ducking under the quilt to work her way further down my belly until she reached her ultimate goal. I arched my back and moaned with pleasure as she took me into her mouth and proceeded to warm me up. Very thoroughly.

When she'd had her wicked way with me, she pulled herself back up above the quilt and lay snuggled next to me while I lay panting, recovering my breath. When I was finally able to speak, I asked, "OK, what's going on? Coffee in bed and a blow job? Did I miss a few weeks and it's my birthday?"

I felt Deborah's chuckle rather than hearing it, as she was pressed so tightly against me. "It's a special day, so I thought a special start might be in order."

Now she had me worried. What was special about today? I racked my brains, trying to think of anything that had happened on this date, or was about to happen, but could think of nothing. It wasn't anyone's birthday and it wasn't our wedding anniversary; it wasn't an anniversary of any kind that I could think of. So what was special? I decided that my best bet was to keep quiet for a while and see if any clues emerged.

After a few moments, Deborah untangled herself from me and knelt beside me on the bed, looking down at me fondly. This gave me the opportunity to watch her beautiful breasts rise and fall as she breathed. This always distracts me and I can never resist reaching out and touching her, caressing her, rubbing my fingers across her nipples until they started to stiffen in response.

Deborah laughed, then caught my hand and pulled it away, kissing my fingers then starting to suck on them. Just watching the movement of her mouth was enough to start arousing me again and I grinned up at her. "You'd better tell me what the special occasion is, or I might just leave you here to finish off on your own."

That produced a loud raspberry in response. Deborah knew it was a hollow threat, and she reached down to touch me as I started to twitch back into life. I caught her hand before she could really get to work and asked again, "Come on, what's so special about today?"

"Well, it was twenty years ago today when a certain spaceship arrived in orbit above a poor defenseless planet, and the Captain of that spaceship came down and seduced me."

I started to laugh, then pulled her back down to lie alongside me as I said, "I don't remember you putting up much of a fight."

Deborah chuckled softly, "I was in lust with you from the moment I saw you and in love with you by the end of the first day. When you left, I was scared that you didn't feel the same way about me. Then I was terrified when I realized I was pregnant. I was afraid you might think I'd done it on purpose to try and tie you down."

I looked down at her, and smiled, "It takes two to make a baby, and neither of us was practicing safe sex on that first visit. When I left, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I was jerking off so much I sprained my right wrist and had to sign reports left-handed for a while. Earthforce kept asking who Captain Squiggle was, as they didn't have a record of him on the payroll."

That made my wife laugh, and she punched me gently in the ribs. I grabbed her hand to stop her before she could leave too many bruises, and went on, "I kept telling myself it was only lust, but I think I always knew it was more than that. And by the end of the second visit to Eriadne, I was sure you were the perfect woman for me. I've never changed my mind about that."

Deborah tucked her head into my shoulder again, and after a moment I felt the wetness of her tears against my chest. Most people don't realize what an emotional woman I married. She keeps it well hidden behind a frozen mask of self-control and only allows the people she loves and trusts to see her true feelings. I consider it an honor to be among the chosen few.

I lifted her head up so I could kiss her and said, "Twenty years? Was it really twenty years ago?"

When I thought about it, I knew she was right. Our son had celebrated his nineteenth birthday the previous April and he'd been born—a little prematurely—eight months after my arrival at Eriadne B. Marcus and his younger sister were still attending school on Earth, although both were staying with us for their summer vacation. Marcus had started college the previous autumn and was about to progress into his sophomore year. Mattie was still at boarding school.

Where did those years go? They'd been mostly good years and the woman who lay beside me in bed was the main reason for them being that way. We'd had a couple of difficult periods early on in our marriage and

during those times I'd thought I might lose her, but we'd come through stronger than ever and now I couldn't imagine life without her. So I kissed her head gently and told her so.

Deborah smiled up at me and her eyes filled with tears. "I can't imagine what life would have been like if you hadn't found me. I just know that for the last twenty years you've made me happier than I could ever have imagined."

Well, that brought tears to my eyes and you can imagine what happened next. Yes, I know. Bunnies on aphrodisiacs. Fortunately, I'm in pretty good shape for my age and can still get the main gun up and firing as often as is needed.

By the time we'd showered, dressed and got down to breakfast, we were running late. The children were already in the kitchen, devouring a pile of pancakes and crispy bacon that I fervently hoped Marcus had cooked. If Mattie had been involved then they would probably have been inedible. My daughter loves to cook but might be called an 'experimental' chef. She has a habit of trying out strange flavor combinations that rarely work. I still shudder at the memory of the sardine and peanut butter pasta she once served up, insisting it was the epitome of haute cuisine.

Marcus, on the other hand, is a pretty good basic cook. He'd realized in his last year at boarding school that when he went to college there would be no one to get food for him, so unless he wanted to live off frozen meals and fast food, he'd better learn to fend for himself. He'd signed up for cookery classes, and as a result was quite competent at a range of his favorite dishes, which included pancakes, maple syrup, and bacon. Which just so happens to be one of my favorites, too. Like father like son.

My son looked up from his plate and grinned as his mother and I entered the kitchen. "You're late," he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin and placing his fork on his now empty plate. "If you'd got down earlier, I would have made you some breakfast."

It took a lot of cajoling, plus a little bribery—which involved giving him the keys to my motorbike for the day—but he eventually agreed to cook up another batch of bacon and pancakes for me and his mother. While we were waiting, I asked what the kids had planned for the day.

Having got the keys to my bike, Marcus announced that he was going down to Tuzanor to meet up with some friends whose parents all worked for the ISA. It was at this point I realized that he'd always planned to cook breakfast for us, just to get hold of my motorbike. He could have caught one of the regular shuttles to Tuzanor, but riding the bike down there was much more fun.

Mattie was planning to spend the day at the Ranger compound where we lived. She'd persuaded Marcus Cole to start teaching her to use the Denn'bok—the Ranger fighting staff—and had a lesson booked with him later that morning. When she heard this, Deborah smiled and asked, "Would you mind if I joined you, Mattie? I want to learn how to use the staff myself."

Mattie scowled a little but agreed to let her mother accompany her. They get on better these days, but my daughter is still a bit of a daddy's girl. I wasn't sure I totally approved of the two of them learning to use the Denn'bok and made a mental note to make sure I booked some lessons with Marcus Cole soon myself. I didn't want the women in my life getting more proficient with a big stick than me!

When Marcus delivered our breakfasts, Deborah and I ate with enthusiasm, while I fed bits of bacon to Oscar—our dog—under the table. I was trying to do this surreptitiously, but my wife spotted me, which earned me a glare.

"Matthew! You just encourage him to beg. He's had his breakfast..." She trailed off and looked quizzically at the children. "You did give Oscar his breakfast, didn't you?"

Mattie and Marcus looked at each other guiltily, then each claimed they thought the other had done it. Deborah stopped eating immediately and stood, muttering to herself, "Honestly! That sad, deprived animal would starve if I didn't feed the poor thing."

That was something of an exaggeration as Oscar loitered near the table whenever food was being served, and he usually got a share of whatever was going. If he hadn't been exercised regularly, he'd have been as round as a barrel. I then realized with a guilty twinge that it was my wife who took care of exercising him most of the time as well as feeding him. He spends the time between meals and runs fast asleep in his bed in my office. My contribution to his welfare is to sneak him tasty treats and to throw spitballs at him if he snores too loudly.



By this time we'd finished breakfast—for Oscar that took about 5 seconds—and cleared up the dishes, so I stood to make my way to work for the day. Deborah was already dressed in her running gear, so she gave me a swift kiss on the cheek, called Oscar to her side, then set off with him for her daily run around the compound. The kids both disappeared back upstairs to make their preparations for the day and after pouring myself another cup of coffee, I left the kitchen, turned right, and took the ten paces necessary to reach my office. Arriving at my desk less than half a minute after I'd left the kitchen, I sat down in my comfortable chair, lifted my feet onto my desk and leaned back.

I knew I should really go to our home gym and exercise off the pancakes, but today I decided to postpone that until later. First, I'd finish my coffee, go over the reports that had arrived overnight and plan out the day.

Even an old curmudgeon like me had to admit that life was pretty good.

It was an hour or so later when Deborah nudged the door to my office open and let Oscar in ahead of her. He plodded his way across the room, panting heavily, then flung himself into his bed with a loud groan. I laughed, looking up at my wife as she stood by my desk, holding out a fresh mug of coffee for me while nursing her own tea.

I took the coffee and said, "You need to go easier on him. He's not getting any younger you know. And for that matter, neither am I, so you need to go easier on me, too!"

That produced another raspberry. My wife has quite a range of noises she uses to express herself, but that one seemed to be her favorite just then.

"You both need to exercise more regularly. Oscar gets fed too many treats and you..." she pointed accusingly at my waistline, "...are getting love handles." I looked down at the small roll of flesh that over-spilled the top of my pants and had to admit she was right. More time in the gym was called for before I needed to buy bigger pants.

I saluted Deborah with my coffee mug and said, "I promise I'll spend an hour in the gym when my meeting with Sech Rastenn is over. Are you off to join Mattie and Marcus Cole now?"

Deborah nodded then took another sip of her tea. "I have an ulterior motive. I do want to learn more about using the Denn'bok, but I also want to make sure that Mattie isn't making a nuisance of herself. I've noticed she's been spending an awful lot of time hanging around Marcus and Susan recently."

I grinned up at her as she finished her tea. "That's hero worship. You know Mattie thinks Susan is the best thing since sliced bread. She's learned that old Babylon 5 mantra off by heart." I pulled my face into sober lines and quoted, "Ivanova is always right. I will listen to Ivanova. I will not ignore Ivanova's recommendations. Ivanova is God."

Deborah laughed then paused as she turned towards the door and said, "Oh yes, Mattie hero worships Susan, but our daughter is also heavily in lust with her hero. Mattie is fourteen now, Matthew, and her hormones are raging. Susan may only be a low level telepath but I'm sure she's noticed. I want to make sure that she, Marcus and Talia aren't bothered by Mattie's attentions."

My wife then laughed again and winked at me. "Mattie gets it from you of course. I seem to remember there was a time when you were quite enamored with a severe looking older woman who wore a military uniform..." She paused and added, "Until you got the uniform off of her that is." Then Deborah wiggled her butt at me and left the room, leaving me with my mouth hanging wide open. I could only be thankful that she hadn't come out with that comment while I was actually drinking my coffee. I think I might have choked to death.

I shook myself then closed my mouth, blinking a few times as I took in what my wife had just told me. I ignored her outrageous allegation of my previous attraction to more mature women in uniform; never happened. I have no idea where she got such a shocking notion but I never doubted that she was correct in her conclusions about our daughter: as an empath, she could read emotions like a book. I had just not thought my daughter was old enough for that type of feeling just yet. But it looked like my baby girl was growing up fast. Too fast. Yet another sign of how the years had flown since I'd first met her mother.

I was just starting to feel a little melancholy about how time had a habit of getting away from me when a soft knock on the door alerted me to the arrival of my next visitor.

Rastenn was a Minbari Warrior who'd been a Ranger for over twenty-five years, rising through the ranks to become one of the senior teachers in the Anla'shok. He had specific responsibilities for the assessment of applicants who wanted to join the Rangers, and it was in that capacity that he'd asked for a meeting. We had more candidates than we had places for training, and he wanted to go through some of the applications with me, before making a final decision on whom to accept.

Despite his years of service, Rastenn gave little appearance of aging; most Minbari look unchanged for many years longer than humans, and only show their age once they reached their 9th or 10th decade.

I called, "Come in" and stood at my desk as Rastenn entered, pausing to bow slightly and to raise his hands to make a triangular shape. This was the Minbari form of honorific greeting.

"Entil'Zha." He bowed again. "Thank you for finding the time to see me."

I smiled, bowed my head slightly and waved him to a chair opposite me as I sat down again. "You're welcome, Sech Rastenn. There's nothing more important to me than the selection of the next generation of Rangers and I'm honored that you think I can be of assistance to you in this onerous process."

You see? I ~~have~~ learned some manners over the years. Deborah would be proud of me.

Dealing with the Minbari on a regular basis has forced me to become a little less straightforward in my approach to life. But it didn't stop me thinking, "Just shut up and get on with what you want." But I didn't say it out loud. Progress of a sort I guess.

Rastenn lowered himself gracefully into the seat opposite me and nodded towards the data-pad on my desk. "Details of all the candidates for the next phase of testing have been sent through for your review, Entil'zha. I have grouped them into three categories: definitely accept, definitely decline and possible. I would appreciate your comments on those in the last group in particular, but you may wish to review all the candidates, of course."



I smiled and lifted the data-pad, calling up the details Rastenn had sent through while pondering that he was probably the most non-belligerent Warrior Minbari I have ever come across. I'd once asked him why he behaved so differently from others of his caste and he'd told me of the lesson he'd learned on Babylon 5 when he'd visited the station as a young trainee.

He'd been so obsessed by the honor of being a Ranger and the importance of his role that he'd refused to join one of his fellow trainees in rescuing a woman who'd called for help, because he was unsure that doing so would bring him sufficient honor. His colleague had been badly beaten as a result, and Rastenn had learned that being a Ranger wasn't just about his own rectitude and whether he died a noble death. It was about supporting his fellow Rangers and fighting for the weak and defenseless. He'd told me that his teacher had said to him, "...death will have meaning if it comes when you are in fullest pursuit of your heart." Ever since then he'd tried to live his life according to the lesson he'd learned.

All I can say is it made him a lot easier to deal with than most Minbari Warriors. And yes, despite years working on Minbar, I still think Minbari Warriors are bombastic, pompous, arrogant assholes who need a Den'Bok shoved right up where the sun doesn't shine.

Slowly.

We worked through the 'possibles' together and agreed on the final list. I was about to call our meeting to a close when Rastenn looked up and gave me a gentle smile. "There is one of the candidates I have already approved for the next stage of testing who I think might be of interest to you."

I raised an eyebrow but kept quiet, waiting for him to continue. The Minbari tapped gently on his data-pad then nodded at mine. I lifted it off the desk again and scrutinized what he'd sent through. It wasn't long before I was smiling myself.

"Is this the first applicant we've had from this planet?" I asked.

Rastenn nodded and said, "Yes. I know you are familiar with the colony there. Do you know this young man?"

I shook my head. "Not that I recall. I haven't been there for a few years, and he would have been very young at the time of my last visit. But part of his name is familiar. Let me just check..." I paused as I pulled up the biographical details on the applicant's file, and then grinned broadly. "I thought so. I knew his grandfather. And if this young man is anything like his mother's father, then he'll make an excellent Ranger."

I put down the data-pad and looked across at Rastenn. "You know what? This has given me an idea. I agree that this applicant should be invited to the next phase of testing, but I have a suggestion as to how and where the tests should take place. Leave it with me overnight before you get back to him."

Sech Rastenn nodded then rose, bowed, held his hands in a triangle formation, and left my office. I sat a while longer, gazing out of the window, lost in memories. Then I heard the outer door opening and my daughter's excited tones ringing through the house. Checking the clock, I realized it was time for lunch, so I whistled to Oscar and made my way through to the kitchen.

My session in the gym would have to wait.

I lay in bed that night, relaxing in the warm afterglow of lovemaking, thinking back on the day. I never did get to the gym. The afternoon had been taken up with meetings and reports, and before I knew it the evening had arrived. Not that the time of day made much difference to the schedule of work in the Ranger compound. Keeping a look out for the security of all the planets in the ISA was a 20 hour a day job. (Minbari days are shorter, remember?) But as the northern hemisphere where the compound was located moved through autumn into winter, the darkness closed in earlier and earlier, and soon there would only be a few hours of light and long hours of darkness every day.

Long nights weren't a problem as far as I was concerned. More excuse for spending time in bed. And sleeping wasn't the only thing I had in mind.

That evening Marcus had called to ask permission to stay down in Tuzanor overnight. He'd promised to get my motorbike back safely by lunchtime the next day, so I'd agreed while wondering about where he planned on sleeping. The only thing I was sure of was that he wouldn't be sleeping alone. My son takes after me when I was his age although I'll deny it if you ever say so.

Mattie had eaten her supper with an enthusiasm I'd shared as she hadn't been involved in the cooking. Then she took herself off to her room to do whatever 14-year-old girls do. Actually, thinking about it, it was probable that Mattie was doing something that few other 14-year-old girls do. She'd developed a passion for military history and was currently reading up on the Earth/Minbari war. She knew her grandmother—for whom she'd been named—had died in that war. She was fascinated by the whole period, and particularly the reasons for the Minbari's very conditional surrender when they'd been poised to destroy Earth.

Mattie's eagerness to get back to her reading left Deborah and me to do whatever we wanted on a dark autumn evening, so I guess the result was inevitable. We went to bed early.

Now I fought back the waves of sleep that threatened to engulf me as I lay, comfortable and sated, with my wife's warm body held tightly against me. I could hear Deborah's breathing deepen, so before she could drift off completely, I said, "I got a surprise today in my meeting with Rastenn."

Deborah's breathing faltered, then she yawned, "Nice surprise or nasty?"

I smiled. "Nice, I think."

After a pause, Deborah said, "So go on then, tell me." She accuses me of being insatiably nosy, but she's just as bad. I knew if I didn't tell her she would start to punish me in the worst possible way.

She would tickle me.

I really hate being tickled, so I said, "We were going through the applications when Rastenn pointed out the planet of origin of one of the candidates he'd already approved for the next stage of testing."

I paused again and sure enough, I got a light punch in the ribs, which I knew was a warning before tickling commenced, so I continued, "Where do you think he came from?"

"Matthew..."

It was my final warning to stop teasing, so I looked down at where Deborah's head rested on my shoulder and said, "Eriadne."

My wife's reaction was so lightning fast she almost knocked me out with the top of her head as she bolted upright to kneel alongside me and glare down at me. "Eriadne? Who is it? Do we know them?"

In case you're new to these stories, Eriadne B is the planet on which I found my wife and her three sisters twenty years before. Finding them and their planet, as well as having their abilities available to the ISA had changed the course of history in our universe. I knew that because I knew a version of myself from an alternative universe where the sisters hadn't been found. His history was very different to mine, and in his universe Earth was dead and the ISA had been destroyed.

Given this background, Deborah's interest in all things related to Eriadne was inevitable and understandable. She and her sisters had been abducted by the Vorlons, taken to Eriadne, experimented on, changed and trained to become a weapon in their wars against the Shadows. The sisters had refused to fight and kill for the Vorlons and had been placed in stasis as a punishment. They'd been awakened many years later by the Brakiri who'd started a small colony on the planet in the intervening period. The sisters and the Brakiri had found a way to live and work together peacefully until the ship I'd commanded at that time, the Excalibur, had arrived.

Subsequent events had led to me marrying Deborah, while my then First Officer and our Chief of Medicine had both hand-fasted with Deborah's sister, Lily. Another sister, Ilas, had built a family with two other crewmembers, while the last of the sisters, Angel, had eventually joined the Excalibur as a member of the Medbay team.

Over the twenty years that had passed since we all met we'd had many adventures, good and bad, including encountering my alternative self from another universe, who was now married to Angel.

Lucky bastard... He didn't deserve her...

Best if I don't go there...

Ilas and her partners had died four years earlier on a mission for the ISA and their son, Vya, now lived at the Ranger compound as one of my closest aides. Losing Ilas, Max and Dureena had been hard on everyone, particularly as Ilas had given her life to save Deborah and probably everyone on board the Excalibur. Those losses had been made worse by Vya's younger sister, Ilori, dying of an illness that had struck us all on the journey back to Earth. Both Deborah and I had never really forgiven ourselves for failing to save Ilori or care for her as her parents had asked.

Lily and her husbands were still living on the Excalibur, where my first officer, John Matheson, had been Captain for a number of years. Angel and my alternate self—we called him Jack as we couldn't have two Matthew Gideons running around our universe, could we?—lived on their own ship and were busily building a trading empire across the ISA. That pretty much brings you up to date, but I'll be asking questions later to make sure you got it all, OK?

So where was I? Oh yes, my wife was demanding information about the trainee candidate from Eriadne. The way she was glaring told me I'd better tell her quickly or blood might be spilled, and it wasn't going to be hers.

I held my hands up to ward her off and said, "Pax! I'll tell you everything, just don't hurt me!"

That changed Deborah's glare into a reluctant smile and she reached down and started to tickle me in a place... well, let's just say that it was a very sensitive area.

"OK, stop that or I won't be able to speak and that'll just annoy you." Deborah stopped tickling, but the glare was back.

"I didn't recognize the name at first, but part of it sounded familiar so I checked on the background and sure enough, he was who I thought he was."

"Matthew, stop talking in riddles and just tell me!" Deborah's golden eyes were glowing with annoyance and her full lips were pouting angrily. Gods, she's sexy when she's mad. Especially when she's mad and naked.

I pushed down my arousal and said, "His name is Kullkarren and he's Nikarran's grandson."

Deborah's hand moved to cover her mouth, which hung open in surprise. I lifted my hand to her chin and went to close it gently, but she swiped my hand away before I could touch her. I looked up in concern as her eyes filled with tears, so I sat up quickly and pulled her into my arms.

"Hey, it's OK, don't cry. This was supposed to be a nice surprise. I didn't think you'd get upset."

Deborah was sniffing against my shoulder as I pulled us back into a horizontal hug. I could barely hear her as she explained, "I tried to visit Nikarran's daughter, Ranikir, when we were on Eriadne for Angel and Jack's wedding, but she wouldn't see me. She's never forgiven me for asking Nikarran to leave Eriadne. She blames me for his death."

I held Deborah tightly and said nothing. I didn't need to. I knew she would be feeling my guilt and remorse. My wife—although we weren't married then—had only asked Nikarran to take Angel away because I'd arrested Angel and threatened to have her tried for murder in an Earth Court. It's a long story, OK? We resolved it in the end but at the time, Deborah, heavily pregnant as she was, felt she'd had to protect her sister from me and the only way she'd been able to do that was to ask her old friend, Nikarran, to help Angel escape.

So Angel and Nikarran had fled Eriadne and ended up on Mars, where Nikarran had been murdered. The Brakiri's daughter still blamed Deborah and me for her father's death, and with some justification. If he'd stayed on Eriadne, he would probably still be alive.

We lay quietly for a few moments then Deborah sniffed loudly and pulled herself together. She snuggled closer to me and said softly, "I suspect Ranikir will be furious that her son has applied to join the Rangers."



She won't want to let him go. I saw him briefly when we visited Eriadne eight years ago. He was just a boy then, but he'll have grown up by now. I wonder what made him decide he wants to join the Rangers."

I shrugged and said, "The Rangers have been visiting Eriadne regularly for a few years now, just checking that the colony is OK and that there's been no repetition of gangsters moving in on them like Lucas Buck did."

A previous visit to Eriadne, twelve years before, had resulted in us getting a very nasty surprise from a mortal enemy from our past, Lucas Buck. He and his men had moved in and taken over the running of the colony, then attacked us when we arrived, nearly killing me and taking Angel away with them.

I went on, "Kullkarren has probably come across the Rangers we've sent to check up on them, and he's decided he doesn't want to be a farmer like his father. Lots of young people of his age are looking for a way off their home planets and the Rangers can provide them with an escape route. That's why we carry out such strict assessments, to make sure that we only recruit the ones who really want the Ranger's life and duties, and not those who are just looking for a way out of a humdrum existence."

Deborah gave another little snuffle and asked, "Will you be bringing Kullkarren here for the next level of assessment? I'd like to meet him if you are."

That brought me nicely to what I'd hoped was the good part of the surprise. Things hadn't gone quite to plan so far, but I was optimistic that this might improve.

"I thought we might do something a little different for the grandson of an old friend. How would you like a trip to Eriadne?"

That brought Deborah back into a kneeling position at my side even quicker than before.

"Really? But the children..."

I lifted my hand to her lips and shushed her. I do like to live dangerously.

"There's no hurry. The next intake isn't for a couple of months. We could wait until the kids have gone back to Earth, then get a White Star to take us to Eriadne for a few days. I could do the assessment there and bring Kullkarren back with us if he passes the tests. What do you think?"

For some reason, Deborah wasn't looking quite as enthusiastic as I'd expected, but then she broke into a smile. "Could we change your plan just a little? Instead of getting a White Star to take us there, could we ask Jack and Angel if they could give us a lift? Their new ship is very fast so the trip wouldn't take much longer and they're planning to visit Minbar soon anyway. We could make it a real family reunion."

I kept a tight rein on my feelings as I knew Deborah would pick up on any negativity I felt for her suggestion. There were a number of problems with it as far as I was concerned, but the most important drawback could be summarized in two words. Jack Gideon.

I don't know what it says about me that I don't much like my alternative self from another universe, and I don't want to know. Maybe it's because we're just a bit too much alike, or maybe it's the differences I don't like. Maybe I'm just jealous because he's married to Deborah's sister, Angel, towards whom my feelings have always been anything but brotherly.

So while the prospect of spending a few days in Angel's company was always welcome, the price of having her husband tagging along could be irksome. None of which I was willing to share with my wife.

Before I could say anything, Deborah went on, "I'd like to see Angel again soon if I can. She's been avoiding linking to me and Lily for a while, and I'm worried about her. So if you could put up with Jack for a couple of weeks, I'd be really grateful."

I've had some very pleasant experiences when Deborah has expressed her gratitude, so I put on a brave face and smiled as I said, "That's a wonderful idea. Why don't you link with Angel tomorrow and set it all up?"

What I didn't tell Deborah just then was that I had an ulterior motive for wanting to visit Eriadne at that time, beyond testing Kullkarren and making my wife happy. And travelling with Jack Gideon could well be useful for my hidden agenda. But if Deborah didn't find out about my reasons just then, she'd think I was being kind and generous and would reward me accordingly. The form of that reward might well leave me limping for days, but I wouldn't be complaining.

Yes, I know; I'm a double-dealing, second guessing, devious bastard. Fortunately, my wife already knows this about me and loves me anyway. I guess that makes me a smug bastard, too.

Deborah tried to link to her sister the next day, but couldn't make contact so we sent a hyperspace message to Serenity. The response came back quickly but was brief, and came from Jack rather than Angel. He said they'd be with us on Minbar by the middle of September. You can imagine how happy this made me.

We sent a message to Eriadne to advise them of our plans then told the children about the trip at supper the next day. They were disappointed that they couldn't join us, as they both had good memories of our last visit to Eriadne eight years before, for Jack and Angel's wedding.

My own memories of that visit weren't quite as positive, for a number of reasons.

Fortunately, the kids hadn't been present during the attack by my former friend and Technomage, Galen, who'd tried to kill my wife and her sisters. Galen ended up being forced to take a long walk off a short cliff and then having his ship dropped on him, but not before he'd seriously injured Jack, who at that point was Angel's brand new, fresh out of the box bridegroom. I could have told Galen that getting the sisters—particularly Angel—pissed off with him was not a good idea, but the Technomage had never been good at taking advice. On that occasion, he'd paid the ultimate price for that failing.

So the plan was that the kids would go back to Earth and their respective schools in early September then Angel and Jack would join us later in the month. They'd spend a few days on Minbar, resupplying their ship and doing some trading before we'd leave for Eriadne. This meant we'd all get to celebrate our birthdays either en route to or during our stay on Eriadne.

The message from Jack had warned us that Serenity was still having some teething problems, which caused me some hesitation in agreeing to hitch a ride with them. However, I was assured that it was nothing serious, just some issues with the recycling plant that made it important for them to stock up on supplies before we left Minbar. I was also mindful of the fact that ships the size of Serenity did not usually have water tanks large enough to allow for water showers or baths.

So I was faced with the prospect of a long voyage on a ship with recycling problems, vibe showers only and run by a Captain I didn't much like. And during the trip I would have to share my birthday with him.

Peachy. And yes, I'm well aware that I sound like a petulant 5-year-old. Dealing with Jack Gideon has that effect on me, OK?

I was beginning to regret ever having suggested the trip in the first place.



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Homecoming

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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