

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

by The Space Witches



Oscar

Epilogue

5th October 2288

Matthew Gideon

Serenity arrived on Minbar mid-morning, so having arranged for our bags to be taken up to the house, Deborah and Angel took Baby for a walk through the Rangers' compound on their way to collect Oscar from Marcus, Susan and Talia. I knew once they got there, the sisters would be occupied for some time. My wife would make sure of that.

I took the opportunity of their absence to ask Jack if he'd accompany me to the house, as there was something I needed to speak to him about. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but nodded his agreement, his curiosity overcoming his caution. Curiosity has always been a weakness of the Gideons, as I knew full well, and I was using that knowledge to my advantage.

We walked in silence through the compound and once we arrived in my office, I settled myself behind my desk into my favorite chair and gave a small sigh of contentment. It was good to be home. Castles and servants, extravagant bedrooms and exotic bathrooms were all very well, but there really is no place like home. This particular cowardly lion agrees with Dorothy on that.

Lifting my feet up onto my desk, I grinned at Jack, who had made himself comfortable in the chair opposite me. "Serenity is a wonderful ship, Jack, and I'm truly grateful for your hospitality and everything you've done for us over the last couple of weeks, but I have to admit I'm glad to be home. I can't wait to have a good soak in a hot tub. Are you sure you and Angel don't want to stay up here tonight? We have all the hot water you could ever want."

I couldn't help rubbing that in. Knowing Serenity only had vibe showers, while I could linger under gushing hot water for as long as I liked, preferably with my wife or even in my wife, gave me a little warm glow of contentment.

Yes, I'm a bastard. I've learned to live with it.

Jack narrowed his eyes again, but this time he had an odd little smile on his face, but he didn't explain. He just said, "Speaking of my ship, I have some engineers coming over this afternoon to fit the parts I need to fix the last part of the recycling system, so I'd like to get back down to Serenity to supervise. What is it you wanted to talk about?"

I reached over to a drawer of my desk, opened it and pulled out a long, narrow instrument. I waved it in front of me, and said, "This is what I want to talk about. The birthday gift my wife gave to yours. The gift you plan to copy, distribute and make a fortune from. Tell me I'm wrong."

Jack sat back and smiled. "Of course you're not wrong. Those things will become one of my most profitable lines. What's your problem? And why do you keep one of those in your desk drawer? Oh hell, don't answer that. I can guess."

I laughed. "Damn right you can. There's one of these little toys in pretty much every room in the house. We never know when we might need one." That was the plain truth. There wasn't a room in the house where Deborah and I haven't made love at some time. When the kids are in school we have the whole place to ourselves and when we're not working, we like to indulge in our favorite recreational activity; hot, hard and heavy sex. It keeps us both fit and is way more fun than the gym.

I leaned across to the open desk drawer and pulled out a data crystal, which I slotted into the receiver on my desk, then waved at Jack to look at the view-screen on the opposite wall. "This is the patent that's been put in place on the design." My doppelganger went to speak but I held my hand up to stop him. "I know you don't give a damn about infringing copyrights and usually you'd get away with taking the example you've got apart, copying the design and getting it out to market. But this is not just any old copyright. This is a copyright in the name of the wife of the Entil'Zha of the Anla'Shok."

Jack raised an eyebrow and looked at the screen more carefully. It showed that the patent was held in the name of Deborah Montgomery. The device had been my wife's idea in the first place, so it had only been right for her to hold the patent and copyrights.

Jack shrugged and said, "Much as I like your wife, Matt, I don't see how that makes a difference." He liked my wife a damned sight better than he liked me and the feeling was mutual. I'm not going into my feelings for his wife, as they're too complicated, but 'like' hardly covers it.

I dropped my feet from my desk and leaned forward, waving Deborah's little toy in Jack's face as I said, "The difference is that if you try to rip us off, you'll find a Ranger waiting for you in every spaceport, at every colony and on every planet and moon you land on. You'll find your cargo inspected, thoroughly, before you're allowed to offload a single item for sale. And you'll find that local authorities will be notified of exactly what you're buying and selling, so that appropriate taxes can be calculated and collected, with the full help and cooperation of the Rangers. That's what will happen if you try to pirate this design, Jack. Count on it."

Jack leaned back in his chair, staring at me with those narrowed eyes that were identical to mine and saying nothing. I leaned back in my chair in an identical pose. The silence went on for a while until Jack said, "So what's the deal? There has to be a way we can both make a profit on this."

Smart man. Which I know, of course, because we have the same brain and Gramps Gideon didn't raise any stupid grandchildren.

I smiled. "We could have put the design into manufacture ourselves, but we decided that having it known that the Entil'Zha and his famous novelist wife were responsible for the creation of a new sex toy wouldn't really do our reputations any good. I'd planned to have this talk with you even if Deborah hadn't given Angel one of these for her birthday."

So we put our heads together and thrashed out a deal. It ended with a contract giving Jack the rights to manufacture and distribute the copyrighted design. The production and sales would be run through a shell company registered on Mars, owned by the four of us. Mars is notoriously secretive about companies registered there, and it would be well-nigh impossible for anyone to track the true ownership of that company, which we decided to call Denery Inc. If you can't figure out why, then shame on you.

Jack and Angel got 60% of the ownership, while Deborah and I got 20% each. I was willing to let Jack have the larger share, as he'd be doing all the work, and the extra was for him keeping my name and Deborah's off the paperwork.

We recorded the terms onto a data crystal, took one copy each, and shook hands on the deal. But I did warn Jack that Deborah would be auditing the company accounts and she'd know if he tried to hide anything. An empathic auditor is a truly terrifying prospect to anyone with larceny in their hearts, like Jack. And like me. So the threat would keep him honest.

By the time we'd finished our business, I heard the front door opening and Oscar bounded into my office ahead of my wife and her sister. Having hurriedly replaced the regenerator/vibrator—I hoped Jack and Angel could come up with a better name for marketing it—I gave the dog a thorough fussing then turned my attention to another pair of big brown eyes surrounded by a mane of blonde hair that sheds nearly as much as the dog.

Deborah flowed into my arms and gave me a long lingering kiss, which nearly distracted me enough not to notice Jack and Angel, who were also locked in a similar embrace, with Baby sitting at their feet, wagging his tail.

Nearly.

When we finally broke for breath, my wife smiled up at me and said, "Did you get your deal done?" Deborah knew what I'd planned to do that morning, and we'd agreed on the approach and the terms we'd settle for before we'd left Serenity.

I nodded. "Exactly as planned. And I told Jack you'll be watching him like a hawk. He won't try to cook the books and if he does, you'll soon know about it."

Jack lifted his head from his wife's and frowned across at us. "I would never try to cheat my new business partners!"



Even Deborah laughed at that. She smiled sweetly at my doppelganger and said, "Of course you would, Jack, if you thought you could get away with it. Just as Matthew would."

I looked at Jack and said, "There's no point denying it. She can always tell if we lie. Now, does anyone else want lunch or is it just me?"

We retired to the kitchen and raided the refrigerator, which someone had thoughtfully restocked in our absence. There are perks to being Entil'Zha.

Dinner that evening was fun. We'd invited everyone from Serenity to join us at the house, as a small repayment for their hospitality during the trip to Eriadne. As we'd expected, Shukar and Harry declined the invitation, staying on board Serenity and Baby-sitting.

So it was just six of us for dinner, which I'd helped Deborah prepare. Don't look so surprised. I may burn toast but I'm not entirely useless in the kitchen. At least not when closely supervised by my wife. I really must get some cooking lessons from my son next time he's home.

The food was excellent, the company entertaining and overall, it was a delightful evening, except for Frank's usual flirting with my wife, and her uncharacteristically coquettish responses. But I gritted my teeth and smiled and smiled throughout the meal. Hamlet came to mind: "...one may smile, and smile, and be a villain..."

We'd moved into the living room for coffee and brandy when my opportunity came at last. I'd been waiting and planning for this moment for a while. Actually, since the first night on board Serenity, but I hadn't had access to the things I needed at that time. But now I was back on my own ground and a quick run down to the infirmary that afternoon—without my wife's knowledge of course—had given me what I required.

One useful thing I'd noted while travelling on Serenity was that Jack, Angel, Ana Clara and I all took our coffee strong and black. Deborah always drank tea—she grew up British, what can I say?—so only Frank took cream in his coffee. I guess it's a French Canadian thing. So I volunteered to make drinks for everyone and carried through the tray with the cups, coffeepot, teapot, slices of lemon and a jug of cream.

Our living room has three comfortable sofas placed around a central low table, on which I placed the tray then started passing round cups to everyone, followed by the cream jug which I placed in front of Frank with a smile. He and Ana Clara were sitting on the sofa opposite Deborah, while Jack and Angel sat on the middle sofa, sideways on to the rest of us.

My wife gave me a piercing glance as I moved around the table from Frank and Ana Clara, so I quickly clamped down on any feelings of glee and took my place next to her, pouring her tea, then coffee for everyone else. While I'd been out in the kitchen, Deborah had gotten everyone their preferred after-dinner liquor, so we all settled back to enjoy the rest of our evening, while nibbling on some chocolates that Angel had brought with her.

It wasn't long before Frank started to sweat and shift uncomfortably in his seat. I was very careful not to notice and to pay full attention to what Ana Clara was speaking to me about at the time. I was also careful to suppress any feelings other than interest in what she was saying. But I noticed that her attention was wandering towards her husband as he sat next to her, and as it would have seemed odd if I didn't follow her lead, I also looked at Frank. By now he was getting quite red in the face and had leaned forward with his arms crossed on his knees. He leaned towards his wife and whispered something, after which Ana Clara suddenly gave a wide yawn, then covered her mouth and excused herself.

"I am so sorry. It's been rather a long day and we have an early start tomorrow, so I wonder if you'd forgive us if we left now? Don't let us break up the party...no, please, we can see ourselves out..."

Ana Clara trailed off as it became apparent that she and Frank weren't going to be able to slide out unattended. Jack and Angel also decided to call it a night, so Deborah and I went to the front door to see them all off. I was careful not to notice how Frank shuffled out, bending forward, with his hands clasped firmly in front of his groin. What I did notice was that everyone else was also carefully not noticing Frank's predicament.

I smiled as I thought that it was going to be a long, painful walk back to Serenity for the handsome Navigator. I did consider offering him a ride down to the spaceport on the back of my bike, but then decided that his current condition could have made it a very uncomfortable ride for both of us.

As soon as the front door was closed, Deborah turned on me, glaring. "Matthew, what did you do?"

I tried the wide-eyed innocent look, but it didn't work. So I then tried the huffy and offended approach and that got me nowhere. Eventually I just threw myself on the mercy of the court. I gave an ingratiating smile and steered my wife through to the living room, where I picked up the jug of cream and said, "I'd better dispose of this. I certainly don't need it."

Deborah blocked me from leaving the room and took the jug from me, sniffing it and asking, "What did you put in it? You haven't poisoned the poor man, have you?"

She looked quite alarmed so I made soothing noises, took the jug and placed it back on the table, saying, "Not poisoned and there's nothing poor about that lecherous bastard. He's been leering and slobbering ever since he first set eyes on you, so I decided that if he wanted to screw something, I'd give him a head start. Ana Clara is going to be a very happy woman tonight. Probably all night."

My wife did not look amused. "Matthew, that could be very dangerous. I mean if he can't... well, if he's stuck... oh, you know what I mean! It could cause a blood clot and that could kill him. How are you going to explain that?"

I tried to calm her, "It's not serious, honestly. An ice pack in the appropriate place will soon fix him up... I mean bring him down. He'll be fine by morning."

Deborah really wasn't seeing the funny side of my little practical joke. She stormed out of the living room, ran up the stairs and slammed the bedroom door behind her. I'm so glad we have spare bedrooms now. At least when she gets mad at me, I don't have to sleep on the sofa.

I poured the cream away so that no one else could drink it, tidied up the living room, let the dog out then took myself off to a spare bed. I slept alone that night and it took a fair amount of groveling the next day, plus confirmation that Frank was OK, to get back in her good books, but it was worth it just for the memory of the lascivious bastard squirming on the sofa as his little problem grew and grew and grew.

I've probably made it clear by now that I don't like people flirting with my wife, so be warned.

6th October 2288

Apart from groveling, I spent most of the day catching up on reports that had accumulated during my absence. Seventeen days away from my desk had allowed time for a lot of reports to build up, even with Trulann taking charge in my absence and dealing with all the small stuff. So I dutifully went to my office early—having slept in the spare room, my morning routine had been rather shorter than usual—and got stuck in.

Deborah and I had reestablished verbal communications over a brief breakfast, even if the temperature was nearly as frosty indoors as it was outdoors. She'd then gone down to Serenity to say goodbye to everyone, leaving Oscar with me. While she was there, Angel called to bid farewell to me. I noticed she put the call through herself and no one else came on line. I think I was in the doghouse with everyone except Angel, who got the giggles when Frank's name was mentioned.

Shortly after Angel cut the call, the spaceport notified me that Serenity had left and I heard Deborah enter the house. She went through to the kitchen and a few minutes later my office door opened; my wife came in carrying a cup of coffee which she placed on my desk. I looked up at her and smiled. "Dare I drink this? Or are you planning on revenge of some kind?"

Deborah sniffed her contempt at this suggestion and said, icily, "I've always despised pranks and practical jokes, Matthew, so I'm not likely to play one. Drink your coffee or not, it's up to you."

With that she turned on her heel and stalked to the door, giving me a very pleasant view as she left, but only just not slamming the door behind her. Oscar woke up with a start as the door closed loudly and gave me an accusing look. It seemed everyone was pissed off with me, even the dog. I heard Deborah mount the stairs and I knew she'd gone to her study to clear her own backlog of correspondence, mostly from her agent and publisher but also some Ranger stuff that she dealt with for me. I stared at the coffee for a moment, then shrugged and decided to take the risk. If there was

anything in it and I suffered for it, it might help get me back into my wife's good books. I drank the coffee. It tasted fine, but that was no guarantee that unpleasant after-effects might not follow.

I got back to work and by lunchtime I felt in desperate need of some exercise—no early morning aerobics remember—so stood and stretched my stiff limbs and decided to go for a walk. There had been no noticeable repercussions from the coffee, so I thought I'd got probably away with it. I hoped that by now Deborah might be feeling more charitably disposed towards me, so I called her and asked if she'd like a walk down to the barracks to see how the IPX people were doing.



They'd arrived on Minbar a couple of days ahead of us and I knew they'd have had time to settle themselves into the accommodation we'd provided. I wondered if they'd heard from IPX since their arrival. Yes, I could have just called, but as I said, I needed some exercise and as my wife was only barely talking to me, I couldn't see any prospect of getting any other kind of workout that required her cooperation.

The ice had thawed a little by then, as she'd spoken to Ana Clara when she'd gone down to Serenity and been assured that Frank was fine. Apparently, Ana Clara had looked happy but tired, which I guess meant she'd made full use of her husband's affliction while it lasted.

So Deborah joined me for a walk down to the barracks, with Oscar off leash leading the way. My wife even consented to linking her arm through mine as we walked, well bundled up against the cold of what was now full winter on Minbar.

We walked down the path to the main plaza where most of the Ranger training and admin buildings were sited, across the empty square, past the Chapel where the statue of Jeffrey Sinclair in his guise as Valen stood, our only accompaniment the chirping of the temshwee in the bare trees. Even in this season, the compound was beautiful. Many of the plants through which the paths wove kept their foliage throughout the year, and the blueish green and silver of their leaves gave the compound the feel of a winter wonderland, with the frost lying lightly over everything, sparkling in the winter sun.

The barracks were situated just beyond the Chapel, and I called Oscar to heel before going in. It didn't take long to find the occupants, as there were just the four of them. Nisrina, Hjalmar, Lowanna and Kullkarren were all sitting in one of the relaxation areas, the three IPX people watching something on the large view-screen hanging on one wall, while Kullkarren had his head bent low over a data-pad.

They all looked up as we entered, and Lowanna immediately started to make a fuss of Oscar. She was obviously a dog lover and I made a mental note to check her baggage before she left Minbar to ensure she didn't try to kidnap our hairy hound. I suspect Angel had made very certain that Baby was on board Serenity before they'd left earlier.

Once we'd all settled comfortably on the chairs available—yes, including Oscar who climbed up on the sofa next to Lowanna, rolled on his back and begged her to rub his tummy—I asked how they

were all doing and whether they'd heard anything from IPX.

Nisrina acted as spokesperson, as usual. "We really should thank you for allowing us to stay here. Everyone has been so kind and helpful. You may have difficulty getting us to leave; we're enjoying our stay so much." She smiled and I wondered how much she was really joking. Compared to sharing that small shuttle on Eriadne, the barracks must have seemed like a luxury hotel.

She went on, "We've had a message from IPX saying they'll have a ship calling at Minbar in a couple of weeks. Are you sure it's OK for us to stay that long?"

I reassured them that the barracks were free for another month, when the new trainees would start arriving to begin their training. I turned to Kullkarren and asked how he'd been passing the time. He held up the data-pad and said, "I've been working through the history of the Rangers from Valen's time onwards and started to study some of the curriculum. I thought I should get a head start if I could."

He looked at me so anxiously I hurried to reassure him. "Take time to enjoy the peace and quiet while you can. Get out and explore the compound, and use the gym and other leisure facilities we have here. Once the other trainees arrive it will be bedlam and you'll be lucky to find space to do anything, so make the most of the facilities and the emptiness now."

Kullkarren gave me a nervous nod and I wondered if I'd now find him running around the compound every time I set foot outside the house. I made a mental note to have a quiet word with Sech Rastenn later, to make sure the young Brakiri didn't exhaust himself before training had even begun.

Nisrina then offered to make us some lunch, but I told her not to worry as we'd made alternative arrangements. Just then those arrangements arrived in the form of several boxes full of warm food sent over from the refectory. Deborah had called them during our walk down and asked them to send a variety of dishes over, to make sure that all our guests' preferences were catered for.

We chatted while we ate, discussing what options might be available for the archeologists now the Eriadne dig had been halted. Nisrina told us she'd had a hint of a post at a university on Earth. "It's a small faculty and not exactly one of the top places to study, but the post has tenure so I'd have some security. Maybe it's time to hang up my trowel and settle into academic life at last."

Lowanna said she'd not got anything planned, so I turned to Hjalmar and asked whether he had anything lined up. He grinned and nodded, his big bushy beard bobbing up and down as he told us that he was waiting to hear about a job with a dig scheduled on Lorka VII. I nearly snorted my food up my nose at that point and Deborah had to thump me on the back to stop me from choking.

"Lorka VII? Those pompous, murderous, self-righteous, theocratic bastards are allowing a dig on their planet? Did the Most Holy approve? If he didn't, you could find that Eriadne was a piece of cake by comparison."

I then went on to entertain everyone with my own experience of the Lorkans, who had tried to kill me and Liz Lochley on Babylon 5 many years before. I recounted the running battle in down-below which resulted in Liz and me being covered in gunk and stinking to high heavens. I did NOT go into



how we had cleaned ourselves up afterwards. I couldn't help it if the only water shower on Babylon 5 happened to be in Liz's quarters, could I? Or that there was only enough water for one shower?

Don't answer that.

Anyway, that was a part of the story my wife didn't need to know about, so I just made everyone laugh at the state we'd ended up in, then stood to say goodbye. Deborah joined me and linked her arm through mine again as we walked back up to the house, with Oscar following slowly, sniffing at every plant along the way.

When we got back inside, I turned to Deborah and asked, "Am I forgiven yet?"

She looked up at me, her golden eyes serious, and said, "I can never stay mad at you for long, can I? So yes, you're forgiven." She slapped my hand away from where it had started to wander towards her breast and frowned. "But we've both got too much work to do to start messing around now, so you'll have to wait until tonight. Consider that your punishment."

I sighed and admitted she was right; I had a small mountain of work to get through, even after what I'd cleared that morning. But I took her words to mean that I was on a promise for later.

I went back to work and had a brief call with Delenn, outlining my plans for the pursuit of the smuggling ring and got her approval to go ahead. Then I moved to the dining room for a meeting with Trulann, Marcus Cole and Vya. The latter were my two best covert operatives and together we planned the next steps of our attack on the smugglers. In the short-term we were going to put covert observation in place on the people and places Dagool had disclosed. Once we'd collected further evidence, and if we were lucky a few more connections in the chain of command, we'd sweep in and round them all up. By the end of the afternoon all our plans were ready and Trulann went down to the Comms center to send out all the necessary messages to get our people into position. Then I called my wife to tell her I was done for the day.

I was right about being on a promise. We had supper in bed that night and got quite creative with our food. Deborah does love a good game of 'hide the sausage'. And we won't get into how we used the bananas we'd taken up with us for dessert.

15th October 2288



Our nineteenth wedding anniversary, which apparently is bronze. We celebrated by spending a couple of nights in a luxurious new spa hotel that had opened up down in Tuzanor, thinking we might use the tanning booths to get a nice bronze glow. It didn't work out that way as we didn't

leave our room once. Fortunately the room was very well shielded.

We never did get to use the spa facilities but the room service was great. No, not that kind of room service—that's always great—but the food and drink they delivered to our room. I can definitely recommend the place, although you'll have to check out the spa for yourself.

19th October 2288

The IPX ship finally arrived to pick up their team. Nisrina and Hjalmar were packed and ready to go off to their new assignments, Nisrina back to Earth, while Hjalmar had his position on the Lorka VII dig confirmed. IPX was taking them back to Mars where they could pick up their connections. Deborah and I were sorry to see them go, as we'd become friendly, with the archeologists coming up to dinner at the house a couple of times, and we'd joined them for lunch down at the barracks on several occasions.

But all good things etc. and we needed them to move on, as the rooms they were occupying would soon be needed for the arrival of the next wave of trainees. So on the day of their departure, my wife and I rode my bike down to the barracks—leaving Oscar at home this time—to say goodbye.

You might have noticed that I haven't mentioned Lowanna. That's because she didn't leave. The previous week she'd asked to see me and told me that she'd like to stay on and join the Ranger training program. I was a little taken aback at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. Having someone around with Lowanna's background and skills could be incredibly useful to the Rangers. Our explorations had found dead worlds right across the ISA territory and having some archeological expertise 'in house' meant we wouldn't always have to call on IPX for assistance in investigating.

I handed her over to Sech Rastenn, who took her through the qualifying tests in record time, all of which she passed with flying colors. Lowanna stayed in the barracks, along with Kullkarren—with whom I noticed she'd become very friendly—until the other trainees arrived to join them.

And anyone who says that what I really wanted was an extra dog walker for when I didn't feel like turning out on cold wet days might just get sued for slander. They might also know me nearly as well as my wife does.

29th December 2288

All our planning and covert operations came to a head in mid-December. We'd identified more individuals involved in the weapons trafficking over the previous couple of months as well as a few extra bases that were being used for illegal operations. Some of the people involved had connections in high places in several ISA governments, and even more worryingly, we identified five Rangers who were related to those individuals. The day before the planned raids, those Rangers found themselves confined to quarters and on their way back to Minbar for further investigations to take place.

Apart from the absolutely essential personnel we'd used to carry out the covert observations, we'd kept a very tight rein on who knew what we were up to. With Delenn's approval, we hadn't informed any ISA member governments of our operations, as the risk of a leak was too high.

So on the big day, I sent my Rangers into every base, and they took every individual connected to the ring into custody. The raids were carried out without loss of life, although there were a few bumps and bruises on both sides. More on the smugglers than on Rangers, as all our people are trained in the use of the Denn'bok and those things can leave a mark. And yes, I know I said the Rangers are not a police force, and no, we don't have a jail where we can confine prisoners, but this was a case that concerned ISA security, and there was no one else to do the job.

The smugglers' bases were closed down and occupied by the Rangers and all the people arrested were taken to a deserted mining colony, where we'd set up a holding facility in readiness for our raids. Once we had everything under control, Delenn and her staff contacted all the ISA governments with citizens involved—and that was pretty much every ISA member—and briefed them on our activities.

I'm glad Delenn dealt with the shit storm that followed rather than me. My job from that point onwards was to keep the prisoners confined to the Arisia Mining colony—yes, we were using Marcus Cole's old home as our containment facility—and to ensure that all the proof required to put the prisoners on trial was retained and chains of evidence preserved. We then handed everything we'd collected over to the ISA legal people. They asked us if we could keep our management of Arisia going for a little longer, and while Rangers are not prison guards, I agreed to do so until more suitable replacements could be found.

Fortunately, one of the few ISA members not involved in some way with the ring was Minbar, who were soon able to provide replacements for my Rangers on Arisia. No one was going to mess with the cohort of Warrior caste Minbari who took over the guard duties.

When the suspect five Rangers arrived on Minbar they were interviewed by me, with Deborah sitting by my side. Three of them were fully exonerated. Much to my disappointment and dismay, the other two had both been involved with the smugglers, providing them with information on our movements that had allowed the criminals to avoid earlier detection. These two Rangers, a Drazi and a Human, were shipped off to the Arisia containment facility to await trial with their conspirators. Trulann and I then reviewed and amended all our recruitment processes, and I planned a complete tour of all Ranger bases in the New Year, taking Deborah along with me. During the course of that tour I intended to meet every single Ranger currently in service, with my wife by my side.

So, unlike the First World War on Earth, it really was all over by Christmas—bar the tour—and my Rangers were able to get back to their day jobs, being nosy tell-tales for the ISA and keeping the peace between ISA members.

Marcus and Mattie came home for the holidays, and on Christmas Day we had a traditional dinner of turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, roast potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, carrots, turnips, parsnips, peas and—at my wife's insistence—Brussel Sprouts. Only Deborah and Marcus Cole like these stinky green balls of death, and fortunately, my wife only ate a couple so the usual after effects weren't completely eye-watering. I'd threatened to banish her to a spare bedroom if she ate too many, and told her I wouldn't go near her rear end for a week. The threat of being deprived of a regular spanking—something my wife particularly enjoys—did the trick.

Marcus, Talia and Susan joined us for our Christmas lunch and a good time was had by all. The wine flowed freely enough that by the time they went home, our guests were weaving unsteadily down the path leading to their accommodation.

Oscar got his share of the food, too, but not the Brussel Sprouts. Oscar's farts are quite smelly enough without them.



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Homecoming

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Five B

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