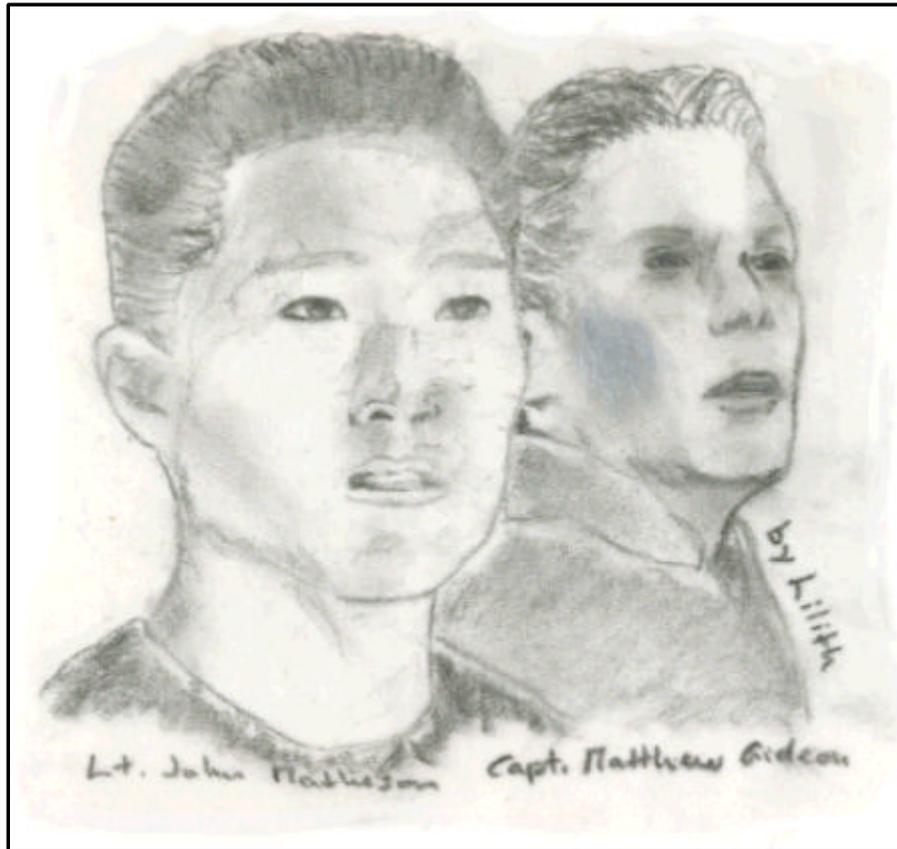


The Witches of Eriadne: Double, Double - Part 1: Arrival

by [The Space Witches](#)

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Lt. John Matheson and Capt. Matthew Gideon by Lilith

Chapter 1

Gideon sat in his office surrounded by paperwork. Why did it never go away? Why, no matter how much he cleared, did it always come in faster than it went out?

He picked up the next report and groaned aloud. Another crew disciplinary problem. In the second year of their search for a cure to the Drakh plague, these were becoming increasingly frequent. His crew had all suffered losses of family and friends back on Earth, and the sense of desperation was building in them all. This led to friction, and small things irritated. The case on his desk was a classic example. Two crewmembers, usually friends, had come to blows over a game of chess. He smiled to himself, *[I never thought of chess as a contact sport!]* Verbal abuse had led to physical violence and both had ended up in med lab.

Now he was supposed to discipline them. He felt more like putting them both in a ring and telling them to slug it out. Hell, he'd join them there given half a chance. Maybe that would work off some of the pent up anger and frustration he carried around every hour of every day.

What could he do to punish these guys? A couple of days in the brig would just make them even crazier. Oh well, scut work it is. Maybe they could take out some of their aggression on the inside of the bullet car tubes.

He picked up the next piece of paper when the office door buzzer sounded.

"Enter. PLEASE enter."

John Matheson entered carrying a new pile of reports. Gideon groaned and dropped his head to his desk. Resting his head on his arms, his muffled voice emerged.

"Take them away. Burn them. Throw them out of an airlock. I don't care which. Just don't put any more reports on my desk!" He lifted his head and smiled at his first officer to indicate he was joking, but Matheson could see the real pain in Gideon's eyes.

"Most of them are just for information. You don't need to do anything other than read them when you get a chance."

Gideon snorted with laughter. "OK, I'll toss those out of the airlock. Which ones MUST I read?" Matheson handed over a single sheet of paper, which brought a relieved grin to Gideon's face. "Thank God for that. I must have done something good today. What is this?"

"Latest communication from the Rangers. They've found another planet which they think we should investigate." Gideon straightened in his chair. Such reports had become less frequent of late. They had investigated most of the easily accessible planets in the sector. New leads were becoming increasingly hard to find, and they were having to spend a lot longer getting to them. And every day spent traveling from one system to another was a day when another few thousand people died on Earth.

"What have they found for us?" Gideon gestured towards the chair on the other side of his desk, and Matheson sat.

Matheson glanced at the report and gathered his thoughts. Gideon liked a summary that was brief and pertinent. His tolerance for woolly thinking had diminished to the point of non-existence. His flares of temper were becoming more frequent, and Matheson had no desire to be on the receiving end.

"Eriadne B. Earth type world previously thought to be inhabited only by a small Brakiri agrarian community, colonized about 60 years back"

"Previously thought to be?" Gideon raised an eyebrow "So what's the latest thinking on the subject?"

"The Rangers have detected F band emissions, which would indicate a much higher level of

technology than should exist there. In fact, some of those emissions indicate a higher level of technology than we currently have ourselves. An Earthforce ship couldn't have detected them. Only a White Star."

Gideon's eyes glittered. "It's them isn't it? Isn't it John? Do you think we've found the bastards at last?"

Gideon leapt to his feet and charged through the doors of his office, barely giving them time to open. As he followed, Matheson thought [*One of these days he's going to move so fast he'll run his nose straight into those doors, and guess who'll have to clear up the mess?*]

Matheson arrived on the bridge just in time to hear Gideon barking orders to Navigation and Helm to set course for Eriadne B. Gideon paced the bridge for a few seconds until the response came that they were ready to jump to hyperspace.

"Jump." He turned to his first officer. "How long Lieutenant?" Matheson heard the underlying question "How many more will die before we get there?"

"Three days, Captain."

For the next three days Gideon prowled the ship like a caged animal. Matheson seriously thought about asking the doctor to tranquillize him. If Sarah Chambers had been around he would have done so. But Sarah had reached her own limits a couple of weeks before, and after a bout of hysterics in Medbay, Gideon had shipped her off to Babylon 5 for a month's recuperation. They had been sent a temp to fill in, but Matheson hadn't got to know the new doctor yet. He wasn't willing to ask a stranger to sedate his Captain. He made a mental note to spend some time with the new doctor. Luke Raven seemed like a good guy, but Matheson didn't trust easily or quickly. It was a trait he'd picked up from Gideon.

In the evening of the third day, Gideon sat at the desk in his quarters, again surrounded by papers and reports. Contrary to his threat to Matheson, he hadn't tossed a single file out of the airlock. He took them back to his quarters with him every night and diligently read through them all.

"Just a martyr to duty." he said aloud and smiled at his own self-pity.

He didn't much like the person he'd been during the last couple of days. He knew that he had been growling and snapping at everyone who came near but he didn't seem to be able to stop himself. He looked up from his desk to the wall locker where he kept the Apocalypse Box carefully secured. He'd been holding back for three days now, but at last his resistance snapped. He just had to ask the damn thing about Eriadne B.

He stood up with a jerk and moved to the locker, tapping in the code which only he knew, and opened the door. Taking the box carefully from its shelf, he placed it on his desk. As usual a thrill of... something ran up his arms when he touched the outer casing. He'd never dared touch the box

itself, he just knew that such familiarity would be punished. He didn't quite know how, but was sure it would be unpleasant.

Opening the outer case, he revealed the box inside. It sat gently glowing, and he was sure it was watching him. He stood silently in front of it for a while, part of him screaming to lock the thing away, get rid of it, never touch it again, never speak to it again. He knew that every time he consulted the damn thing, it took a part of him away. Perhaps that was why when it spoke it sounded more and more like his voice. Over time there would be less and less of Gideon in his body and more and more of him in the box. Perhaps one day they would totally change places and he would be inside the box, while the thing that inhabited it walked around in his body. But if that was the price to be paid for finding a cure, then so be it.

"What can you tell me about Eriadne B?" He knew better than to ask it what it knew. He had learnt that what it knew and what it would tell were very different things. He knew it lied, not often, but enough to make him doubt its word. So why did he keep going back to it like an addict to a drug? He couldn't or wouldn't answer that.

The box was silent. With a slow rasp the voice which sounded so familiar but so strange emerged.

"Much danger." A pause. "Much pain." A longer silence. "Much pleasure."

Gideon knew that it had said all it was going to, so he closed the case and carried it back to the locker. Danger and pain. Well, what's new? But pleasure? That was different. The box had never promised him that before. He laughed to himself and decided it was playing games again. Pleasure? He couldn't remember the last time he'd had any of that.

Matheson sat in the mess hall having finished dinner, wondering which of 5 million jobs to do next. He was tired and didn't feel like doing anything. He just wanted to sleep for a week and hope the world would leave him alone. The more tired he got, the harder it became to block the random thoughts of the crew from his mind. He had to focus on doing so or his next evaluation with Mr. Jones could be his last. He pressed his fingers to his temple trying to increase the block.

"Are you alright, Lieutenant?" The voice that jerked him awake was kind and concerned, deep with a hint of an English accent. Matheson looked up into the dark brown eyes of their new doctor, Luke Raven.

"Fine. I'm fine." He stammered out the words, embarrassed by his weakness.

Raven sat down opposite him, smiling, "Well, you didn't look fine, and you still don't. If you don't mind me saying so, you look nearly as bad as the Captain and that isn't easy!"

Matheson smiled back. "I can't look that bad and still be moving, can I?"

"So what is it that's making you and the Captain, and most of the crew for that matter, look so terrible? Or should I take a wild guess that carrying the responsibility for saving 10 billion lives on Earth is getting to you?"

"Well, no. Actually, it's because we lost the last round of the hopscotch league to the Washington. We think they pulled in a ringer from the Defiant but can't prove it. We take our hopscotch very seriously on this ship."

Raven laughed out loud. Matheson went on, "And of course, the Captain was too busy to join the team, and he's our best player. Did you know he was Galactic Champion in 2260?" He couldn't keep his face straight any longer and broke into a grin.

"Much better. I'd rather prescribe a dose of humor than anti-depressants any day." Raven's smile faded and his eyes became concerned again. He pushed a strand of floppy dark blond hair out of the way. "But I am worried about the Captain. He really does look terrible. He's lost weight that he can't afford to lose and he seems constantly on edge. I've wanted to talk to you for a while, but an opportunity never arose. So I thought I'd make one"

Matheson stood. "And I've wanted to talk to you, too, but not here." They walked to Medbay in silence, Matheson trying to think what he was going to say. Could he ask this man to order the Captain to take R&R? Would it do any good if he did? The Captain in his current state was quite capable of refusing that order. And anyway, the last time Gideon had taken leave on Babylon 5, he'd returned looking as bad as when he left. It appeared that he and Captain Lochley had not parted on good terms.

They entered the doctor's office and Raven closed the door. Matheson sighed, "I'm worried too. He's never been the easiest Captain in the fleet and he's NEVER suffered fools, but these days, he can be just plain vicious. He tore a strip off an Ensign yesterday for no reason at all, and he's never behaved like that before."

Raven looked thoughtful. "Stress affects us all in different ways, and I guess the Captain is under more of it than anyone has ever been before. You probably know him better than anyone aboard. Do you have any ideas on how we can help him deal with it?"

"Find a cure for the plague."

Raven smiled sadly. "I wish I could. And not just for the sake of the Captain's sanity. Well, I'm not planning to prescribe him drugs. I suspect he would have me thrown out of an airlock if I even suggested it." Matheson nodded. "So I need to find another way for him to let off steam. Hmm. Leave it with me Lieutenant."

Max Eilerson had been hiding in his quarters for days. He'd had just about enough of the Captain's snide comments and innuendoes about his failure to find anything useful on any of the worlds they'd visited. What did the man expect? Was it his fault that they kept picking lousy planets? He could only work with what he found. He couldn't invent a cure dammit!

What made it worse was that he hadn't found any useful technology for IPX to exploit, either. They may not be as nearby as Gideon, but they could be even more acerbic. And they had just told him that they were changing his contract, so now his income would be totally commission based.

No regular income. Just payment by results. There was nothing he could do about it. He could hardly resign while the Excalibur was in hyperspace. And who else would have him? He'd pissed off most potential employers by using his brilliance to expose their stupidity. So there really weren't any alternatives to IPX.

And just to make his life perfect, they were on their way to a planet where the only recorded presence was an agrarian colony. But that detail of the F band emissions sounded interesting. There may be something there for Max after all. He just had to think of the right way to exploit the opportunity. Max went back to looking at his latest data crystal. He was still trying to work out exactly how they got into that position and more importantly, who he could persuade to give it try.

When they jumped back from hyperspace, Gideon had assembled his team on the bridge. Dureena had moved in behind the Helm chair to get a better view of the planet as they approached. Only by pushing to the front could she see the viewer. Max stood behind her and made the mistake of standing a little too close. The impact of her elbow and his gasping for air could be heard around the bridge. Matheson stood by his Captain's chair as always, and Dr. Raven stood on the other side. There was an air of anticipation which none of them could have explained. As they emerged from hyperspace, the planet appeared immediately in front of them. "Nice driving," was Gideon's only comment; the ensign at Helm breathed a sigh of relief.

The planet was blue and white and looked so much like Earth that it hurt. Gideon, Matheson and Raven, the Earthers among them, closed their eyes for a moment, unable to cope with the beauty of the planet below. Dureena and Max looked indifferent. Just another planet to them.

"Sensor readings?" Gideon looked quizzically over to the Sensor station.

"Earth class planet. Rotation 23 hours 40 minutes. Numerous life forms, various types. Small cluster of humanoid lifeforms located in the Northern hemisphere."

"Radiation readings?" Gideon wondered if the combined Earth/Minbari/Vorlon technology used to build the Excalibur would be any more effective than a standard Earthforce ship.

"Yes, sir. F Band emissions detected"

Gideon sat forward in his chair. "Source?"

"Unknown Captain. They're coming from the same location as the humanoid lifeforms, but I can't pick up any machinery or other technology that could be producing them." The Sensor officer sounded fretful, worried that the Captain would blame her for the failure of her equipment to give him all the answers he wanted.

"Exactly what I expected." Gideon sat back in his seat, a satisfied smile playing around his lips.

"Put us in stationary orbit above the source of those emissions." He looked at his senior team.

"Conference room." He stood and stalked off the bridge.

"It's them, dammit, I know it's them." Gideon paced the floor as Dureena, Max, Matheson and Raven took their seats around the table. "But how do we approach them without their blasting us out of the sky? I'm sure they could do just that if they wanted."

Max looked alarmed. "Shouldn't you have thought of that before you put us in orbit above them? Or are you trying to get us all killed? And who are 'they'?" Gideon glared at him but didn't answer. He continued to pace.

"Will you please sit down? You're making me dizzy!" Dureena grabbed Gideon's arm as he passed and pulled him down into the chair next to her. Her strength always surprised him on those rare but memorable occasions when she chose to use it.

"Recommendations?" Gideon snapped out the word and stared straight at Matheson.

The Lieutenant took a deep breath and started. "I think we should make a very low key approach initially. Just one shuttle. Minimum numbers of crew. Just me and Max."

"Rationale?" Gideon was having one of those days when it was an effort to get the words out. He felt that if he tried to speak more than the bare essentials he might start screaming and never stop.

"We want them to see that we mean them no harm. I can fly the shuttle. Max is the best equipped to tell us whether we've found what you expect. If they attack, I may be able to fend them off telepathically. Or if I can't defend us, I might get a message through to you, even if they block our instruments. If they attack us with their technology we're dead no matter how many troops you send."

Gideon nodded. He was reluctant to send his first officer into danger; he preferred to lead from the front and would expose himself to danger before he risked his crew. But this time Matheson was right; he would stand a far better chance of success at this mission than Gideon would.

"Now wait a minute." Max sounded worried. "You haven't answered my question. Who or what are you expecting down there? And why should I risk my life to find out? Just how easy do you think it would be to replace someone of my caliber?" A voice that sounded like Dureena's murmured, "Oh you're irreplaceable Max, you're unique." Max whipped round to stare at her and got back one of her most malicious smiles. He decided not to pursue the issue; she always had too many sharp objects to hand.

Gideon intervened. "I'm expecting Technomages." Galen hadn't appeared aboard Excalibur for several weeks now. For once Gideon was glad of his absence. There was no way that Galen would let them investigate the planet that hid his people. He'd hi-jacked the ship for his own purposes before. God knows what he would do to protect his people from Excalibur... or to protect Excalibur from his people? Gideon was never quite sure which.

"And if anyone can help us find a cure it's those bastards. If we can persuade them to help us."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Double, Double

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