

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three - Part 1: Tangled Web

by [The Space Witches](#)



Matthew and Sarah in Medbay

Chapter 1

June 2269

Gideon sat at his desk, reviewing his report to Earthforce. He sat back, satisfied that this was the latest masterpiece in the collection of fiction that he'd been creating for the last five weeks. His earlier economies with the truth in relation to Theta 49 had caught up with him. Now, he had to devote hours every day to building the complex web of truth and lies that allowed him to report the results of their experiments, without disclosing the nature of their subjects.

When Sarah Chambers and Alwyn had told him that they needed a control group of infected people to work with, Theta 49 had been the obvious choice. Robert Black and his people had been infected with the Drakh plague through no fault of their own, but they were a small group on an isolated planet, which was perfect for the type of controlled experiments the Excalibur's medical team needed to carry out. Black and his people had readily agreed to be test subjects, and Black had revealed their dual motivation to Gideon. First, if the experiments succeeded, they'd be cured. But second, despite everything that had been done to them, their sense of duty to Earth made them want to participate in the search for the cure in any way they could. Gideon was still surprised by this loyalty. He was damned sure that Earthforce didn't deserve it.

There was just one problem with using Black and his people--a rather large problem. As far as Earthforce was concerned, they were all dead, so Gideon and Chambers had built the fiction that there were certain genetic similarities between the native fauna of Theta 49 (which Earthforce had already

been told was infected) and humans, which made them ideal experimental subjects. And so the web of lies had been created, and every day it grew and threatened to spiral out of control.

Gideon sighed. They'd been here for five weeks now, and every day of that time, he'd missed Deborah and Marcus, and worried about them. He picked up the cube from his desk and pressed the corner to see the last picture he had of them: Deborah holding his son against her shoulder, smiling gently at him. Gideon touched the image of her face and promised himself for the hundredth time that he'd find a way to be with her, but before he could do that, he had a job to finish.

He'd managed to stay out of Medbay all day, knowing that Sarah and Alwyn didn't need him breathing down their necks when they were working, but it was now late at night. If either of them were still there, they shouldn't be, and he could use that as an excuse to visit and see how they were getting on. Gideon told himself that he was really only going there to make sure they'd stopped work for the day, just his natural concern as Captain. It had nothing to do with his fundamental curiosity about anything and everything that happened on his ship and everywhere else in the universe. He told himself that he wasn't really a nosy person…

Gideon stood abruptly and pulled his black jacket off the back of his chair. Pulling it on he strode out of his quarters and headed for Medbay.

As he sat alone in the bullet car, Gideon thought about the progress they'd made so far. The technology they'd discovered on Eriadne allowed them to strip the virus from an infected person's body. Their adaptation of the Technomage virus gave them a viral screen that prevented re-infection, but their supplies of the original Technomage virus were limited. So what Sarah and Alwyn were trying to do was to replicate that virus as closely as possible, to enable them to modify it into the permanent viral screen. This was proving to be a challenge, as there were subtleties in the design of the Technomage virus that made it hard to reproduce. Each variation that Alwyn and Sarah produced got closer to the original, and when the techniques that Max had discovered were applied, each variation lasted longer before breaking down in the test subjects system and allowing them to be infected again. So far, all but one of their variations had eventually broken down in that way.

They continued to try new varieties, but Gideon knew that their hopes were now pinned on the last test subject who had not re-infected. All traces of the virus had been removed from her system four weeks before when she'd been given Variety 4B of their viral shield, and she was still clean, despite living and working with her colleagues on the planet below for most of that time.

Monitoring the progress of their test subjects had presented its own challenges. Volunteers from the Medbay team had been given the permanent viral shield and were now living on the planet below with Black's people, testing, watching, monitoring them hourly. This created a certain friction between the groups, and Gideon had to allow the team regular visits back to the Excalibur, before tempers frayed to the point of explosion. Unfortunately, every time one of them returned, they had to go through full decontamination to ensure that they didn't bring the plague on board. That was an unpleasant process for all concerned.

Now the hopes of Earth and the Captain's hopes that no one would get murdered on the planet below, rested on the small shoulders of Doris Chan. Gideon shook his head when he thought about this unlikely savior of Earth, wondering how she'd ever ended up a member of Black's squad. She was tiny, even slighter in build than Lily, but the enhancements that led to her being on Theta 49 had given her frightening speed and strength. Sarah's greatest concern was that it was those enhancements that

provided the protection from re-infection rather than the viral shield.

So they had brought Doris up to the Excalibur to monitor her with the more sophisticated equipment available there, carefully decontaminating her before placing her in an isolation chamber full of infected air. She'd been in there a week now and was just about ready to tear a hole in the side of the ship to get out. The Captain had a horrible feeling that on any ship other than the Excalibur, with its Minbari/Vorlon tech hull, she just might have succeeded.

The bullet car arrived at its destination and Gideon stood, ready to go see if his Medbay had been torn apart by the tiny but very, very scary fighting machine confined there.

The Captain walked quietly into Medbay and looked around. At first glance it appeared deserted. He told himself that this was good, as his main purpose in going there had been to ensure that work had stopped for the day, but his sense of curiosity was unfulfilled. He moved to where he could see into Chambers' office and stopped, smiling at what he saw. Sarah was still at her desk, but her head was down on her arms and she was fast asleep. Gideon had spent enough nights in that position to know how sore her neck would be in the morning, so he started to move forward, intending to wake her up and send her to her quarters.

Gideon was startled when a hand held his arm and a voice whispered, "Don't."

He spun around to see Alwyn standing behind him. "For God's sake, Alwyn! Do you want to give me heart failure?" He hissed out the words, not wanting to startle Sarah awake.

Alwyn smiled maliciously. "Do you really want me to answer that, Captain? Well if I must, I suppose the answer would be 'no', but only because Demon would never forgive me. I do like that lady, you know. A pity she has such poor taste in men."

Gideon grinned and spoke quietly. "You're just jealous. Hands off, Alwyn--Deborah's mine." He laughed softly and tilted his head towards where Sarah slept. "If you like tall women, why don't you try your luck with Sarah?"

Alwyn's face froze into a blank stare. Gideon realized immediately that his joke had hit a lot closer to home than he'd intended. He rushed to apologize. "Alwyn, I'm sorry, I had no idea you felt that way about her."

Alwyn stared back, his face still expressionless. "And what way would that be, Captain? There are two reasons why your assumption is totally in error. First, my orientation has generally been towards the male of the species and second," he paused as he looked over at Sarah, "I am far too old for such a beautiful lady."

Gideon nodded toward a side room and walked to it. Alwyn followed and shut the door behind them quietly, still careful not to disturb Sarah. Gideon took a deep breath and decided to meddle.

"Alwyn, whatever your orientation has been, it's pretty damned obvious that you have feelings for Sarah, and don't say that it's none of my business," he held his hand up to stop Alwyn before he could speak, slightly surprised when it worked. He'd never been able to shut Alwyn up before. "She's one of my team, that makes it my business. As for being too old--are we ever too old? I thought I was too old to find another person to love and share my life with, certainly too old to become a father, but look

what happened. I don't think we're ever too old to love, Alwyn, and Sarah needs someone to love her." The Captain turned and looked back out through the transparent wall to where they could see Sarah sleeping in her office.

The Technomage sighed sadly. "Compared to me, you're a young man, Captain. Even Technomages don't live forever. Even if by some miracle I could persuade her to return my feelings, would it be fair? We couldn't be together for that long."

Gideon smiled. "A while back, a man said to me that he'd rather live five years with the woman he loved than a hundred years without her. Grab what time you can get, Alwyn. I have no idea what your chances of landing Sarah are. She's a beautiful woman with a heart as big as a planet, and there are a lot of men who've tried and failed to gain her affections, but she likes and respects you, and what do you have to lose? She'll still be your friend, even if she doesn't want to be your lover."

The Captain sat on the edge of the bed and went on, "This is a difficult place for Sarah to be. It's here she feels she had her biggest failure, a failure that brought her to the edge of a breakdown. When the last of the Zanderi on the planet below died, Sarah felt it was her fault. She'd promised Dureena that she'd do everything she could to save them, but she hadn't been able to do enough. Coming back here has reopened a lot of those wounds for her. It's added to the loss and guilt Sarah has been feeling since her sister and niece died last month. She's covering it well, and anyone who didn't know her would never guess that she's fighting her grief every day. Help her, Alwyn. Give her something to live for other than her work."

Gideon watched as the Technomage considered. Eventually Alwyn sighed again and smiled sadly. "I'll do what I can to help her, but as for being anything other than a friend to her... well, we'll see. Now don't push." He narrowed his eyes as Gideon was about to speak. "I think your nose is far enough into my business. Any further and you're in danger of losing it. I have a small dragon here somewhere that loves to eat noses." Alwyn started patting his pockets.

Gideon laughed and raised his hands in surrender. "No more dragons, please. That one you had on Regula IV did quite enough damage!" He sobered as he continued to look out at Chambers. "How's it going, Alwyn? Is Chan still holding out?"

Alwyn smiled and sat on the only chair in the room. "She is indeed, and the latest analysis that Sarah has done would indicate that her resistance is not due to her implants. The Medbay team and I have now examined every member of Mr. Black's party in detail, and we have noted every change and enhancement Earthforce made to them." For a moment Alwyn's eyes glittered dangerously as he looked up at Gideon. "What was done to those people was an abomination, Captain. Those who did this should be punished."

Gideon nodded his agreement. "Yes, they should, but they never will be. All we could do for Black's people was to hide them, making sure that those responsible for the experiments would never find them. Now we come back and conduct our own experiments on them. How does that make us better than the people who enhanced them, Alwyn? Please don't tell me that they're volunteers, or that we're doing this for their own sake or for the sake of humanity. I'm sure all that has been said before."

Alwyn sighed deeply. "I'm sure it has." He sat and brooded for a moment, then pulled himself together. "Anyway, as I was saying, we've analyzed all the changes and enhancements and discovered that Chan's are identical to another member of the group, Juan Gonzales. He was given Variety 2C of our virus shield and was re-infected within four days. So we know that it's not the implants that are protecting her." He looked up at where Gideon still perched on the edge of the bed, one foot swinging

loosely. "Today we exposed Gonzales to the same virus shield as Chan. Now we can monitor the results."

The Technomage leaned forward in the chair and continued. "Captain, everything we've done so far tells us that if Gonzales is still clear of the plague by the end of a week, then we have the virus we need to act as a permanent shield. We'll know within a week whether we have the final part of the cure."

Gideon closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. [A week. Just a week, then we'll know whether we have it, or whether we have to start again. If we have to start again, with only two and a half years left for Earth.] He pushed the thought aside, refusing to accept that they could come this close and fail.

He opened his eyes and looked at Alwyn. "Thank you. For that news, and for all the work you've done with Sarah. Without your help," Gideon shook his head, "well, we wouldn't have stood a chance of achieving what's been done here." He smiled. "You know that they'll probably want to give you some kind of a medal? Or put statues of you in town squares? Would you like that?"

Alwyn laughed. "Not in the slightest. I think I'll just quietly disappear as soon as we have confirmation and wait for all the fuss to die down." He looked over at Gideon, then asked, "What about you, Captain? What would you like when this is all over, when you can say 'mission accomplished'?"

Gideon shrugged. "I don't really know. Something that lets me be with Deborah and Marcus, but right now the only way I can think of to achieve that is to resign from Earthforce and go live with her on Eriadne."

He stood and started to pace. "The trouble is that I'd be climbing the walls there after a few months. It's a great place, and I could lose myself in that library for weeks," he smiled to himself, "and having Deborah in my bed every day and night could be pretty damned time consuming," the smile disappeared as he continued, "but I'd get bored. I've been traveling and moving for the last twenty years, I don't think I'm capable of settling down in one place."

The Captain turned to Alwyn and asked, "So how the hell do I square that circle, Alwyn? How do I keep my job, keep moving, *and* have the woman I love come with me, when she can't leave that damned planet?"

Alwyn reached out and grabbed Gideon's arm as he paced past the chair. "Sit. You're making me dizzy." When Gideon had subsided on the edge of the bed again, Alwyn spoke. "Why can't Demon leave Eriadne?"

Gideon explained the link with her sisters and the damage done when Angel had been taken away. "When the Vorlons did whatever they did to create that link, they tied those women to each other permanently. It would probably kill Deborah now if she were taken away from her sisters."

Alwyn raised an eyebrow. "Well, the solution seems simple enough: you'll just have to take them all with you."

Gideon laughed bitterly. "Oh yeah, that'll work. I can just see Earthforce agreeing to add three women and four children to my crew. Then I'd have to justify why I still need a Xenoarcheologist and a thief on the team. Getting them to agree to add another doctor would be easy by comparison." He'd gone round and round this in his head ever since he'd left Eriadne and just couldn't see a solution. Maybe

John was right. Maybe the only way for them to be with their families was to resign.

The Captain stood and took a deep breath. "Maybe I'll have an inspiration in the next week, so when we announce that we have the cure, I'll know exactly what to ask for in return." He looked down at Alwyn and smiled. "Do you want to wake Sarah up and tell her to go to bed or shall I?"

Alwyn chuckled. "Oh, I think I'll give you that pleasure, Captain. A piece of advice though, I've seen how she wakes up. Use a long stick."

Gideon laughed and left the room.

Alwyn sat back and considered his conversation with Gideon. As far as Sarah was concerned, he'd see how things went. He may be an old man and his time might be short, but he didn't plan to rush anything.

Gideon's problem was another matter. He and Demon needed to be together, but Alwyn couldn't see a way for that to happen without Gideon leaving Earthforce, which would be a pity. There were few enough trustworthy, compassionate men in positions of authority; he would hate to see their numbers reduced.

The Technomage sat silently, wondering what would happen to the Excalibur and her crew when their mission was completed. Would ISA President Sheridan take the ship back for his own use? How might he use it?

Slowly an idea started to form in Alwyn's head. An idea that would enable Gideon to stay in command of the Excalibur and have Demon join him. To make it work, he had to get Sheridan's cooperation, but how could he do that? He would have to do it in a way that Gideon would never find out. A way that he would believe had come about naturally, not through any Technomage meddling; Gideon was too proud a man to allow that.

A lazy smile crossed Alwyn's face. "Galen, my boy, you are about to call in some favors." He stood and started to leave the room, quoting quietly to himself as he walked. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave..."

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three

{[Part 1: Tangled Web](#)} {[Part 2: The Long Way Home](#)} {[Part 3: Hope](#)}