

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three - Part 2: The Long Way Home

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Matthew was lucky...

Chapter 3

When Gideon awoke, he found he was lying on the bunk in his quarters. Looking down at himself, he could see that someone had taken his boots off and removed his jacket and sweater. When he remembered using his sleeve to wipe up his Second Officer's brains, Gideon could only feel grateful, and hoped that the jacket had been taken away and burned. Puzzled at first as to why his sweater had been removed, he then saw that his arm had been immobilized by an almost invisible, transparent plastic brace fitted around his shoulder, pinning his right arm to his chest. If they'd done that with the sweater on, he might have been wearing the garment for days: blood, sweat, and all.

Pushing himself upright with his left arm, Gideon swung his feet to the floor, then sat still while a wave of dizziness passed. He lifted his hand to touch the left side of his face, probing carefully. It didn't hurt and as far as he could tell, any swelling had gone. Maybe he could face the sight of himself in the mirror after all. He struggled to his feet and made his way across the room to see just how bad he looked.

The image that looked back surprised him. Whatever cuts and bruises he'd suffered to his face had completely healed. There were no signs of injury and no pain where he'd head-butted the floor of the bridge. Only his hazel eyes looked mortally wounded as they stared back at him from the mirror.



His shoulder and arm were another matter. Gideon gave silent thanks that he'd been unconscious when his dislocated shoulder had been put back into its socket. He knew that would have hurt like hell. The skin on his shoulder, back and front, was still darkened by bruising and he could see other marks down the length of his ribcage and along his right collarbone. Given how effective the regenerators were, the Captain guessed that he must have broken the collarbone as well as cracked some ribs. The whole area was still very sore, but at least he could now breathe freely.

Gideon checked the time and realized that he'd only been out for a few hours. As he moved to the wardrobe and pulled out a T-shirt, he wondered what had been happening to his ship and crew while he'd been unconscious. He managed to pull the T-shirt over his head and got his left arm through the sleeve, then pulled the other side down over his right shoulder and arm. It was a tight fit, but he could just get it on. Looking at his boots, the thought of trying to get them on and fasten them, using only his left hand, was too exhausting. The Captain gave up and walked barefoot through to the living area of his quarters, slumping down into the chair behind his desk.

"Computer on. Access..." before he could continue, Captain Ivanova's image appeared on the screen and spoke.

"I've recorded this message to appear as soon as you try to use the computer. It will also alert me that you're awake. My ship's doctor has signed you off-duty until she pronounces you fit again, and I *mean* off-duty, so I've had your access to the ship's logs blocked until I release them. Don't even *think* about trying to leave your quarters until I say you can. You're not on remand or under arrest, but if that's what I have to do to make sure you give yourself some recovery time, I'll do it. So if you don't want to spend the next few days kicking your heels in the brig, I suggest you relax, put on some music, read a book, or do whatever you normally do to unwind. If that usually involves a partner, tough."

Ivanova's grin was wicked as she went on, "You'll have to play patience, Captain, not poker." Gideon snorted as he caught her double meaning. As if he'd have the energy to poke anyone or anything right now. Ivanova leaned forward to disconnect the recording, then paused. "I know I'm wasting my breath, but try not to worry about your crew or your ship. Everyone who needs treatment is getting it, and your people are doing an amazing job in pulling your ship back together. You can be very proud of them, Captain. I'll drop by later. Ivanova out."

The screen went dead, and Gideon sat back in his chair, considering. He'd heard what a hard-ass Ivanova could be, and knew that she'd meant every word. If he tried to break the codes blocking him from the ship's logs or leave his quarters, she'd throw him in the brig without a qualm. He decided to accept the inevitable, and for once in his life, do as he was told. Gideon wasn't sure he had the energy to do anything else. [And I'd look pretty damned stupid turning up on the bridge barefoot, anyway.] He just wished Ivanova had given him some news about John's condition.

Sighing deeply, the Captain looked around his quarters. The shelves looked bare and he could see that many of the items he'd kept there were missing. He realized that everything breakable had gone. They

must have been smashed when the Excalibur was tossed like a straw out of the jump point. Someone must have been in and cleaned up the mess while he was unconscious, and they'd done a good job.

His chess set was back on his desk where it belonged, but they'd put all the pieces back into their starting positions, not knowing how far he'd got with the game. Most importantly, the cube Deborah had given him, with the pictures of her and Marcus, was right in the middle of his desk. He snatched it and pressed the corner, praying that it hadn't been damaged. When he saw Deborah's image smiling out at him, with Marcus held to her shoulder, Gideon smiled in relief. He carefully replaced the cube in the center of his desk where he could look at it, leaving the image he loved best on display.

The Captain then groaned as he remembered some other fragile items that had probably been lost in the crash. He pushed himself to his feet and padded through to the kitchen area, opening the cupboards when he got there. Sure enough, the place where he'd kept his completely illegal supply of wine and scotch was empty. There was still a faint smell of alcohol in the cabinet, but the cleaning crew had done a damned good job of getting rid of it. Gideon sighed again; he could have used a serious slug of scotch right about then.

Wandering back into the living area, Gideon wondered what to do with himself. He was exhausted but too strung out to sleep. He knew he'd never be able to concentrate on a book... BOOK! He ran through to the bedroom, wrenching out the drawer from his dresser, and grabbing the book from inside. He inspected it carefully and sighed with relief when he could see no signs of damage. Gideon had had the book valued and knew that it would bring him just enough money. It was the only asset he had left. Without it, he wouldn't be able to buy... He pushed that thought aside. He wouldn't let himself think about his plans for the future, not until he knew whether he *had* a future outside of a military prison.

Replacing the book carefully in the drawer, he turned as he heard the door buzzer and called, "Enter," as he walked through to the living area. The doors opened to show Captain Ivanova standing in the doorway.

Susan Ivanova looked carefully at the man in the doorway. His face was no longer distorted by bruising and swelling, and the blood that had covered it earlier had been washed away, but the pain was still clearly visible. Except the pain was no longer physical, it was mental and emotional, and showed mainly in his hazel-brown eyes. Her eyes drifted down to his right arm and shoulder, enclosed within his T-shirt, and she smiled. "You look like The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

Gideon's grin was twisted as he stood back to let her into the room. "Well, you don't look much like Esmerelda, but come in. Although this can hardly be considered Sanctuary."

Ivanova laughed and sat as Gideon waved her into the chair by his desk. She watched as he lowered himself into his own chair, moving slowly and carefully. He was obviously still in some discomfort. "How's the shoulder?" she asked.

"Sore. How are my crew and my ship? How's my First Officer?"

Ivanova leaned forward across the desk as she answered. "Recovering, all of them. Lieutenant Matheson is sleeping, but my doctor says he'll be fine. I'll give you access to the damage and repair reports when we're finished." She heard Gideon let out a soft sigh of relief and continued, "But first I need to take a statement from you for the Board of Inquiry." She produced a data crystal from her pocket and dropped it into the reader/recorder on Gideon's desk. "In your own words, Captain, tell me

what happened from the time you received the distress call."

Captain Ivanova sat back and listened as Gideon spoke, watching him closely. She could see a man drowning in guilt and pain, a man close to his limits. If she didn't handle this very carefully, she feared that he might just let himself be thrown out of Earthforce, dishonorably discharged. That was exactly what John Sheridan would have done in these circumstances, and Ivanova could see many similarities between the man opposite her and her old friend. She was determined that Gideon was not going to throw his career away. Earthforce needed officers of his caliber.

He'd gone through the history of the distress call and his decision to respond, and had moved on to his visit to Medbay when Ivanova stopped him. "Before you tell me about your meeting with your Chief of Medicine, I ought to advise you that we can't find her body. We don't know what the Drazi did with her, but..." She trailed off as Gideon shook his head.

"She wasn't there. I got her off the ship before we went after the Drazi. She's on her way to Earth now, with all the data we had on the cure."

Ivanova slumped back in her seat, staring at Gideon with her mouth open. "She's alive? Dr. Chambers is alive? With all the data?" She couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Maybe this whole thing wasn't a complete disaster, after all.

Gideon nodded and explained how he had arranged for his CMO to be taken on ahead, while the Excalibur answered the distress call. Ivanova started to laugh with relief.

"Captain, when I walked in here, I thought that Earth was finished and that you'd be lucky if they didn't string you up from a flagpole in Geneva. Now I think you might just get a Medal of Honor."

Gideon looked across at the woman opposite and frowned. She'd kept her face carefully guarded since she'd entered his quarters, but he'd seen enough messengers with bad tidings to know that she didn't bear good news. But if it wasn't about his ship or his crew, what was it? Her dark brows had been drawn together in a fixed frown, and her rare smiles had looked strained.



She didn't look quite like the pictures he'd seen, maybe because she was out of uniform and she wore her hair loose, the dark curls falling around her shoulders, rather than pulled tightly back, the way it had been in the pictures.

He remembered watching her when she had been the chief broadcaster of the Voice of the Resistance, in the bad old days before the battle for Earth, when Sheridan had led the Earthforce ships to retake Earth from the dictatorship that President Clark had put in place. Gideon had risked court-martial, along with some of his crew mates on the Agamemnon, to watch her reports. Ivanova had always appeared cool and calm, totally professional and completely trustworthy in those broadcasts. Her icy gray eyes were much scarier in real life.

Gideon may never have met Captain Susan Ivanova before, but she was a legend in Earthforce. Second in command to John Sheridan on B5, she'd gone on to become one of the most respected Captains in the

fleet. Her reputation was that she was tough but fair, a good friend and a bad enemy. Gideon knew that her evidence at the Board of Inquiry would be critical. If she decided that his actions had been justified and appropriate, he just might be exonerated. If Ivanova thought he'd been reckless and negligent, then he'd probably spend the rest of his life behind bars.

The problem was that Gideon believed he deserved to be punished for his actions. His decisions had cost his entire medical team their lives and the Captain still didn't know how many others had died or been crippled. While he had gone through the background to the rescue, quietly, keeping his emotions tightly under control, Gideon had kept his eyes firmly on the image in the cube in the center of his desk. That was what he had to fight for. Not his own future, but his future with Deborah and their son.

When Ivanova interrupted him and then started to laugh, Gideon felt confused. "I don't understand. What difference does it make? The medical team is still dead, the fact that Sarah is alive doesn't change that. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad I got her clear, but that won't bring back the people who were murdered by those..." He bit his lip to stop himself. Whatever responsibility the Drazis had in the deaths of his crew, the prime responsibility was his. He had brought the bastards onto his ship. He would never forgive himself for that. Why hadn't he ordered them searched for weapons? What if he'd... He brought himself up sharply. This was no time for 'what-ifs'.

Ivanova leaned forward and gave him a relieved smile. "It makes a lot of difference, Captain. It's the difference between life and death for humanity. When the Drazis killed your medical team, they also wiped everything from your medical databases. We don't know how they did it, the computer virus they used is incredibly sophisticated, but there is not one piece of data left on this ship about the cure to the Drakh plague. We thought it had been lost, and with the loss of your entire medical team, it looked like we would have to start over. But if you got Dr. Chambers and the data off the ship," She paused and looked quizzically at him, "actually, that could explain another mystery."

Gideon waited for her to continue, wondering what she was talking about.

"We were on our way to rendezvous with you at a fairly leisurely pace. If we'd carried on at that speed, we'd have arrived about three hours too late to save your ass, if we'd found you at all. You were far enough off the beacon by the time of the attack that we might never have found what was left of the Excalibur. But we received a message." Ivanova smiled as she looked across at Gideon. "Now, I think I can guess who sent it. At the time, we couldn't figure out where the hell it was coming from. There was no sign of any ship, and we couldn't pin down the source; it just seemed to come from all around. Every ship got the same message at the same moment."

Gideon frowned. "What was the message?"

Ivanova smiled again. "That the Excalibur could be in trouble and that we should haul ass. Well, it was a bit more polite than that, but not much. It gave a set of co-ordinates in hyperspace that I now know matched the location of the Drazis ship. We were concerned that it might be a trap of some kind, but we came at top speed anyway, on full battle alert. When we got to the location, there were no ships there, but we picked up energy patterns indicating weapons had been fired. With no sign of any ships in hyperspace or engine trails, there was only one place everyone could have gone, so..."

Gideon interrupted her. "So you dropped into normal space and into the middle of a battle."

Ivanova shook her head gently. "That wasn't a battle, Captain, that was annihilation. With odds of ten to one, and with the degree of damage the Excalibur had suffered, you didn't stand a chance. You were dead in space when we dropped in, and the pack was gathering for the kill."

Gideon nodded. "I know. I didn't expect to live long enough to regain power after that last shot from the main gun." He paused, his head down, reliving the moment when he had prepared himself to die. Taking a deep breath, he went on. "I guess your message must have come from a Technomage called Alwyn. It would be just like him to hide his ship and make his message untraceable. So when I got him to take Sarah away, it looks like I not only saved their lives, but my own as well." He laughed weakly. "He is *never* going to let me forget that, you know. I'll spend the rest of my life hearing about this one, and this time I think he's earned it, even if he does keep saying 'turnips' to me."

Gideon watched the brief flicker of puzzlement cross Ivanova's face, but she chose to ignore his comment. She said, "It might have been him who sent the message, but the decision to get them off the ship was yours. If anyone saved the Excalibur, Captain, it was you."

Gideon shook his head and was about to deny it, when Ivanova butted in and instructed him to continue his story. He took a deep breath and went on, describing what had happened after Alwyn and Sarah had left. Telling another Captain, who understood the burden of responsibility he carried, somehow made some of his actions and decisions make more sense. Ivanova interrupted a few times, seeking clarification either about his actions or his motivations, but never being critical. Gideon found himself almost believing that what he had done wasn't so unforgivable--almost. He went on up to the point where Ivanova's face had appeared in his viewscreen. "You know, Captain, I meant what I said then. I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful sight."

Ivanova smiled and shook her head, then leaned forward to lift the cube from the center of his desk. She held it up to the light and examined it, before saying, "This proves you're lying. What is it? I've never seen anything like this before. And who is she?"

Gideon reached out to take it from her, gently, holding the cube carefully while he explained its source. He wanted to be sure it wasn't damaged, that it would never be damaged. He didn't feel as if he had much left to live for at that moment, and he wanted to hang on to the few things that were still precious to him. He went on, "She's the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, if I could just figure out a way to make that happen, and that's our son. Before you say anything, I should show you a more recent picture. He looks *much* better now." Gideon attempted another weak smile.

Ivanova looked puzzled as she said, "I didn't realize you were married."

Gideon shook his head and smiled sadly. "I'm not. We don't have a legal contract in place, but that doesn't change the fact that I want spend the rest of my life with her." He took a deep breath and asked, "So what do you think my chances are? What will a Board of Inquiry recommend for a Captain who got suckered into a fake distress call, allowed his ship to be boarded by hostiles, who didn't check closely enough to disarm them, who let his entire medical team be massacred, then nearly got his ship blown out of space? Oh, and endangered every man, woman, and child on Earth in the process. Do you think they have a cell deep and dark enough for me?" Gideon dreaded the answer, but he had to ask.

He watched Ivanova carefully as she leaned forward to respond. "Let me put this another way. What should we do with the Captain who found the cure to the Drakh plague and saved the human race from extinction? Who on his way home answered what appeared to be a legitimate distress call from a ship belonging to a member of the ISA? Who had the foresight to send his most important crew member and data critical to saving Earth on ahead, to remove the risk of that data being lost? Who managed to evade five enemy ships in hyperspace, and despite being seriously injured and his ship being badly damaged, managed to hang on until help arrived, thereby saving most of his crew and his ship?

What should we do with that Captain?"

Gideon sat back and sighed. "It all depends on your perspective, doesn't it? I guess that saving that data and getting details of the viral screen back to Earth are the things that everyone will remember. No one will recall how badly I screwed up on the way home." He wished he could believe it would be that easy, but he knew that the families of his medical team would never forget his failings.

Ivanova shook her head. "You didn't screw up, Matt. You did your job and you did it well. Don't get hung up on the guilt. I know all about guilt, believe me. No one does guilt like Russians do, and Russian Jews do it better than anyone else. A man once gave up his life for me--literally swapped his life for mine, and it took me years to stop feeling guilty about his death, even though there was nothing I could have done." She pointed at the cube Gideon still cradled in his palm. "Focus on life, not death--the future, not the past. Find a way to be with your woman and your son, and to live."

Taking a deep breath, Ivanova unzipped her jacket and reached inside, pulling out a large flask, the outline of which Gideon had noticed when she arrived. "I heard that your 'medicinal' supplies had been lost." She waved the flask in front of Gideon and he could see that it contained a clear liquid. He looked a question at her. "Vodka. 80 proof. Got anything to put it in, or shall we take turns swigging from the bottle?"

Gideon fetched two metallic cups from the kitchen area, then sat and watched her pour, asking, "What does your doctor say about this? Am I allowed alcohol?"

Ivanova laughed, "This isn't alcohol, Captain. This medicine was prescribed by my ship's doctor as part of your treatment."

Lifting his cup in silent salute, Gideon took a sip and nearly choked. His eyes started to water and his admiration for the Captain sitting opposite increased, as she slugged her shot down without batting an eyelid. Gideon followed her example and held his cup out for a second measure. When he got his voice back, he half-croaked, "So, if you get to call me 'Matt', does that mean I can call you Susie?" His mouth ran ahead of his brain, which couldn't quite believe what he'd just heard himself say. [Must be the vodka talking!]

Ivanova's teeth showed but he didn't think she was smiling. "Susan is acceptable. Call me Susie, and they'll need to put your other arm in a brace, too."

Gideon laughed, and swallowed the second measure, starting to feel very warm and woozy. "What is it with women who served on B5? Captain Lochley insists on Elizabeth, and you on Susan. You know that Liz bit me once for calling her that? I'm not telling you where. Now you threaten to break my arm." He realized that he was getting drunk incredibly quickly and tried to remember when he had last eaten. He couldn't recall. Maybe drinking 80 proof vodka with Ivanova wasn't such a good idea right now. [To hell with it. It just might help me sleep and not wake up for a week.] He downed the refill Ivanova had given him.

The Captain could feel himself turning maudlin as he put the cup down on the desk, then leaned forward and propped his head on his one good arm. "Why do beautiful women always want to beat me up? Even she threatened to bite me when I tried to shorten her name." Gideon looked sadly into the cube on his desk, wishing that Deborah were with him, wanting to sleep with his head on her shoulder and her arms around him. That was the only place he could imagine feeling at peace. [God, I miss her so much.]



Ivanova leaned across the desk and picked up the cup, then pointed at the cube. "What's her name, then?"

Gideon smiled, fatuously. "Deborah. That's Deborah. Not Debby, or Debs or even Debsy, but Deborah. My Deborah." He looked down at his cube again and turned mournful as he thought of another beautiful woman. "How am I going to tell Sarah?" Gideon took the refilled cup back from Ivanova and swallowed the contents.

Ivanova looked at the man sitting across the desk from her, definitely the worse for wear, which was exactly what she'd intended. She planned on getting Gideon paralytic drunk, roll him into his bunk and let him sleep for as long as it took him to wake. She'd tackled most of the issues she'd wanted to raise, and had been looking for the right opportunity to talk about what had happened in Medbay. Now he'd presented her with that opportunity, but it was a good question. How in the hell was he going to tell Dr. Chambers that every one of her team had been murdered?

Having stopped off at the Excalibur's Medbay on her way to Gideon's quarters, Ivanova had gotten a brief glimpse of the carnage that had taken place there. The forensics team was progressing slowly and had made their initial report. The Excalibur medical team had been brutally dispatched, but at least it didn't seem that any of them had suffered for long. The Drazis had been efficient in their mayhem. She watched as Gideon's gaze slowly focused on her and he asked, "Why did they do it? What could have made them murder my people and then themselves? How do I explain this to Sarah?" His words were slurred but the pain in his eyes was clear enough.

Ivanova poured him another drink, sighed, and shook her head. "I don't know the answers to those questions, and I wonder if we'll ever know. It's clear that the Drakh wanted to sabotage any chance of your getting that data home, but why should a group of Drazis help them? We don't know. Initial analyses don't show any indications of the use of drugs." What the Drazis had done was a mystery, and Ivanova wasn't sure that they'd ever find the answer.

She smiled gently at Gideon as he emptied his cup, then she continued, "The Drazis are aggressive and suspicious, but they're not easily forced into anything they don't want to do. Bastards broke my foot on B5 when I was trying to stop them fighting!" The memory of her eventual solution to that fight made Ivanova smile. [Green and purple indeed!] She sobered as she saw the pain clearly visible in Gideon's eyes, and poured them both another drink. The metal cups they were using prevented him from seeing that she'd hardly touched what she'd poured for herself.

As he threw back another measure, Ivanova continued quietly, "What's really amazing is that the Drakh thought it was necessary to murder your medical team and wipe out that data. They sent ten

ships, cruisers and bigger, to attack you and blow you out of space, but they obviously weren't sure that would be enough, so they sent in the Drazis as a backup. Yet somehow, you beat them all, Matt. Somehow you survived that attack, and even their Trojan horse didn't work. You did one hell of a job today, Captain, one hell of a job."

Ivanova had lowered her voice gradually as she spoke, watching Gideon's eyes closing and his head falling to his chest. Her ship's doctor had told her that she needed to get him to talk, then to get him to sleep. [Looks like two out of two, but how do I get him into his bunk without waking him?] She walked quietly around the desk and put her hand under Gideon's good arm, whispering, "Come on, Matt. Let's get you to bed. Just stand up. There's a good boy."

His eyes half-opened as she managed to get him to his feet and supported him into the bedroom. When Ivanova lowered him to the bunk, Gideon reached up and caressed her face gently with his left hand, whispering, "Angel? I thought we'd lost you," before his head fell back on the pillow and he slept.

Ivanova straightened, wondering who Angel was, and pulled the blanket over him. She just hoped that his hangover wouldn't be too bad. Then she left to make her report for the Board of Inquiry, stopping only to fulfill her promise and release the ship's logs for Gideon to read when he woke up.

The sound of the door buzzer dragged Gideon out of a sleep so deep it could almost be called unconsciousness. He had no memory of dreaming, [Hell, I don't even remember going to sleep! How did I get in here?] and was grateful for that, at least. He was less grateful for the pounding headache he was now suffering. The door buzzer going off for a second time brought him upright on his bunk, and he swung his feet to the floor, calling, "OK, OK! Give me a minute, will you?"

Staggering upright, Gideon nearly fell as he tried to extend his right arm for balance and found it wouldn't move. Memories of the previous day came flooding back and he groaned, wishing that the headache was his only pain. As he entered the living area, he called, "Open," and looked up to see a tall blonde woman standing in the doorway. Very tall. Very blonde. Her skin was as white as her hair, and her eyes a very pale blue.

"Captain Gideon." She nodded at him as she stepped through the door, and Gideon acknowledged her with a wave of his left hand. He was very much aware of the fact that he was unwashed, unshaven, barefoot, had slept in his clothes, and probably stank. Not exactly how he preferred to make a first impression. Before he could ask who she was, she told him. "I'm Greta Uhrenholt, Chief of Medicine on the John Proctor. Captain Ivanova asked me to check you over."

Gideon stood quietly while she ran a scanner over his arm and shoulder, then released the brace, getting him to move the muscles until she was satisfied. "The area will be sore and stiff for a few days. As well as dislocating your shoulder, you broke your collarbone and cracked your humerus. If it's any consolation, I believe that your command console was even worse off. You almost destroyed it when you went for your little jaunt. Next time you decide to go flying around your bridge, Captain, I suggest that you make sure your command console is retracted back into the ceiling where you can't hit it."

This was delivered in a monotone voice and Gideon could see no sign of a smile on Uhrenholt's face, but he hoped she was joking. He quirked a small smile back at her and said, "Doctor's orders?"

The doctor nodded but her face was expressionless as she ran her scanner over his head, then delved in a pocket and brought out a small vial of pills. "Take two now and keep the rest for the next time

Captain Ivanova decides you need a dose of her medicine. In ten minutes, you should stop wanting your head to fall off your shoulders."

Gideon swallowed the pills dry and looked carefully at Uhrenholt. "Am I fit for duty?"

She shook her head. "Not for twenty-four hours, but I'm releasing you from confinement to quarters. Before you ask, I've just done the same for your First Officer. He had a nasty concussion, but he is recovering well. Let Lieutenant Grigoria take care of things for another day, Captain, then you and your XO can take over again." The doctor's eyes looked sympathetic, even if her voice was brusque and her face unemotional.

Gideon nodded and called, "Thanks," to her back as she spun on her heel and left his quarters.

Half an hour later, showered, shaven, in clean clothes and with no headache, Gideon sat at his desk. Getting his boots on had been a struggle, with his right shoulder still stiff and sore, but he'd managed it in the end and felt a lot more in command of himself. He smiled at how vulnerable being barefoot had made him feel. Did he really expect everyone to try to tread on his toes? He shook the thought away as he started to work his way through the damage reports waiting for him.

After an hour's reading, he wished Uhrenholt had left him to sleep. The cost of his mistake, in both lives and damage to the ship, was appalling. His guilt and depression had built as he'd read the engineering and medical reports, which set out in detail just how badly his ship and crew had suffered.

Then he found Ivanova's report to Earthforce, which she had copied to him. She'd exonerated him completely. The report said that he had followed regulations in responding to the distress call, and that he was to be commended for his forethought in sending Sarah Chambers and the medical data off ship before starting the mission. It went on to say that it would have been inappropriate to subject the Drazi to strip searches when they were in need of immediate medical treatment, and no lesser searches would have detected the weapons they carried. It concluded that Gideon was to be congratulated for his quick thinking and actions, which had kept his ship from destruction long enough for the other Earthforce ships to arrive.

Gideon sat back and closed his eyes, feeling guiltier than ever as he fended off the wave of dizziness that swept over him. When he opened his eyes again, he caught sight of the bottle of vodka that Ivanova had left behind, still half full, on the corner of his desk. The temptation to drown himself in it was almost overwhelming, but he knew that he owed it to his crew to pull himself together and get on with his job. He realized that the dizziness probably came from not having eaten for over a day, so he pushed himself to his feet, carefully pulled on his jacket, and left his quarters.

The corridors between his quarters and the mess hall were chaotic, full of people he didn't recognize, apparently pulling his ship to pieces. Gideon knew they were carrying out repairs, but it hurt like hell to see the guts of the Excalibur spread out over the floors by strangers. Gritting his teeth, he made his way to the nearest mess hall as quickly as he could.

The doors opened, and the Captain saw that the room was nearly full. He recognized many of the people there as his own crew, but there were a number of strangers present, sporting a variety of ship's badges on their left arms. It looked as if there were representatives from all six other ships in the room. As he walked to the counter to collect his breakfast, Gideon heard the noise level drop. When he'd entered, there had been a buzz of conversation from the discussions going on at every table. As he

walked past each table, every conversation stopped. By the time he filled a plate with food and placed it on a tray, the room was in total silence behind him.

Gideon steeled himself to turn, dreading the looks of condemnation he knew he would see on every face. He was responsible for what had happened, every life that had been lost was because of his mistake. He knew he deserved the contempt that he dreaded seeing in his crew's eyes, but also knew he would just have to live with it and hope that one day he could earn back their respect. Hearing the noise of chairs moving behind him, Gideon braced himself and turned, holding his tray, expecting to see a mass exodus from the mess hall, as people refused to even occupy the same room as him.

The sight that met him nearly brought Gideon to his knees. Every man and woman in the room was on their feet and saluting. In total silence, at rigid attention, his crew told him without words that he was still their Captain.

Gideon managed a painfully weak smile and said, "You had to wait until I had my hands full, didn't you?" He heard muffled laughter in response, then a young ensign with the arm-patch of the Thetis took his tray from his hands.

The Captain straightened, returned the salute painfully, as the muscles in his shoulder and arm were still stiff, and murmured, "At ease." Then the clapping started, accompanied by cheering, whistling and stamping as the young ensign led him across the mess hall. Gideon had never felt so embarrassed in his life as he did while his crew and the strangers amongst them all applauded vigorously. He nodded to everyone as he passed, smiling, while knowing inside that he didn't deserve this. They should all be hating him, not applauding him.

He followed the ensign to a table where she placed his tray, and he thanked her quietly as she left. It was only then that Gideon saw who was standing, waiting for him at the table. He reached out and shook hands with John Matheson who stood smiling quietly, enjoying his Captain's discomfort. They rarely touched like that, but this was a special occasion. Gideon sent a brief thought, telling John how much he appreciated the support, knowing that John would never read him, but half hoping that just this once, his XO would make an exception.



The cheering quieted, and Gideon was at last able to sit. John sat opposite and the Captain looked at his XO carefully. There were no signs of the injuries John had suffered, just a lingering sadness in his dark brown eyes. Gideon knew that Matheson would be feeling the same guilt as he did, feeling that as XO, he should have done something, anything, to prevent what had happened.

The Captain smiled and picked up his fork, saying, "You look good, John. How do you feel?"

Matheson smiled back, "Much better. The doctor says I can go back on duty tomorrow."

At the word 'doctor', Gideon paused, a forkful of reconstituted scrambled egg halfway to his mouth. He carefully placed the fork back on the plate, his appetite suddenly gone. Looking up at John, he asked quietly, so no one else could hear, "How am I going to tell her, John? How can I tell Sarah that I got all her people killed?"

Gideon could see his own pain reflected in the warm, dark eyes opposite, as well as sympathy and

concern. Matheson spoke equally softly, "I don't know right now, Captain, but we'll find a way. You don't have to do it all alone, you know. We'll work it out together." The XO smiled gently. "And maybe Alwyn will help us and keep an eye on Sarah for us."

Gideon realized that Matheson was aware of the feelings the Technomage had for their ship's doctor, and smiled back. "I guess he will. Thank you, John." He tried to project all his gratitude for John's support and friendship into those three words. Picking up his fork again, he started to push the food on his plate around, but it held little appeal.

The Captain looked up as his XO spoke again. "You'd better eat that. I had orders from Demon that I was to take good care of you."

Gideon grinned. "She said that?"

Matheson smiled and nodded. "Yes, she was very clear about it. And you know how much she scares me, so you'd better eat up. If you go back to her looking thin and unwell, she's going to take it out on me."

Gideon smiled sadly. "I wish I knew when we'll get back there, John. It could take weeks or months for us to get the Excalibur fit to move, get her back to Earth, get new orders and work out how we're going to find a way to be with our families." The ache inside him that came from missing Deborah and Marcus grew every day they were apart and he wondered how much longer he could stand it.

John returned his smile. "I know. But we're going to find our way home, Matthew." Gideon raised an eyebrow at John's use of the word 'home', but Matheson continued before he could say anything. "Home for you and me is where our families are. The place isn't important, it's the people who matter. Somehow, we're going to find our way home. We may be going a very long way around, but one day we'll get there--home."

Gideon smiled. Somehow, John's words had given him hope. He now had hope that one day he could be with his family, that surviving the last couple of days had been worthwhile, that there was something positive to look forward to and to work toward. He was about to tell John as much when his XO looked severe and pointed at his plate. "Now eat!"

The Captain grinned. "Yes, Mother."

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