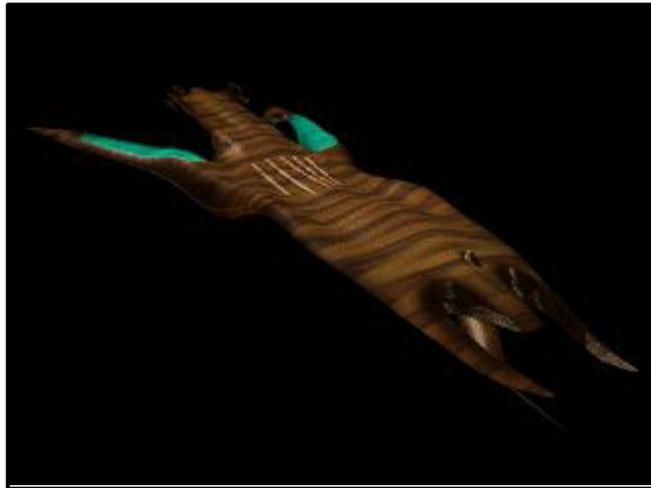


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three - Part 2: The Long Way Home

by [The Space Witches](#)

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A Drakh cruiser

Chapter 2

Gideon shook his head as he came around and wished he hadn't. The pain in his head and the pain in his shoulder were roughly equal and equally agonizing. He stumbled to his feet, half aware that he couldn't move his right arm, and staggered to the front of the bridge. He realized that he'd only been unconscious for a few seconds. The Excalibur was still tumbling crazily through space, with the Drakh ships heading straight for them.

A quick glance around the bridge showed him that half of the crew was either unconscious or dead at their posts, and the other half in not much better condition than he was. His eyes paused for a split second as he noticed Matheson's body, flung up against a bulkhead, with those parts of his face not covered in blood looking totally white. With a quick prayer that John was only hurt, not dead, Gideon turned his attention back to the consoles in front of him.

He hit the communication controls and sent out a call for medics and the emergency bridge crew to report ASAP, then reached for his Second Officer and helmsman, who lay slumped across his console. Pulling the crewman upright with his left hand, Gideon knew that the man had to be dead. He'd left half of his face and some of his brains smeared across the panel. Murmuring an apology beneath his breath, the Captain pushed the helmsman's body out of his seat, and took his place. Wiping the mess of blood and brains aside with his sleeve, Gideon gave silent thanks that he'd worn his jacket with sleeves that day. The thought of doing that with his bare arm made him shudder, as he tried to bring the ship under control, operating one-handed and left-handed at that.

He became aware that someone had slipped into the seat next to him and looked around to see Lieutenant Jackson taking over the weapons controls. Gideon managed a pained half grin and said, "Get the guns firing and try to gather the fighters back together. See how many we have left, while I get us back on an even keel."



Looking back up into the viewscreen, Gideon could see the five Drakh ships still coming at them. He shook his head again to clear it and gasped at Jackson, "Where in hell are the medics? Why aren't they up here?"

Jackson kept focused on her task as she reported brusquely, "We had reports of fighting in Medbay. I sent Marines there to tackle it, and I'm waiting for their report now, sir."

As Gideon fought for control over his ship, his head spinning nearly as fast as the Excalibur, he thought, [Oh fuck! I let in a Trojan horse. Those bastard Drazis were part of the whole damned plot. I'll kill every one of them. I'll hang them from the roof of the landing bay and to hell with Earthforce regs!]

It was partly the Excalibur's eccentric motion that had kept them alive so long. The Drakh had been unable to bring their weapons to bear on a target that was moving so erratically, but Gideon knew the strain that motion was putting on his ship would soon become intolerable and she'd tear herself apart. Slowly, using thrusters, he brought the ship under control, while Jackson kept the guns firing and brought the remaining fighters back into the battle.

Reports started to flood in from damage control teams all over the ship and the news ranged from bad to horrendous. Jump engines were out, most of the main engine power had failed and the Excalibur was holed in a dozen places. The only power they had left was to thrusters, life support was struggling, and if they kept firing their guns at the current rate, they would use all their energy reserves in less than an hour. Over half of his crew was injured, many incapable of carrying out their duties, but somehow they kept fighting. Gideon had never been so proud of his people as he was at that moment.

Jackson's voice broke his concentration as he tried to maneuver away from the oncoming Drakh ships. "Jump points opening, Captain."

The original five Drakh attackers dropped out of hyperspace behind them. They were now totally surrounded.

Gideon whispered, "Oh, fuck it," and heard Jackson's murmured reply.

"Amen to that."

The Captain took a deep breath and looked around at the young, dark Lieutenant sitting next to him. "Let's take some of the bastards out with us."

Jackson swallowed and nodded, looking at him anxiously, waiting for her orders. Gideon knew she was well aware that they were going to die, and she was barely holding it together. She was looking to him to provide her death with some meaning.

Gideon programmed a heading straight at the largest of their attackers, awkwardly sluggish with his

left hand, and hit every thruster his ship had left working. Their movement was painfully slow. A garbage scow could have evaded them at that speed, but he wanted the Drakh to think that was all they had left. He wanted them to think that this pitiful attempt to ram the Drakh mothership was his last desperate gamble. Well, not quite. He had one card left up his sleeve, and it was an ace.

"Bring the main gun on line." He whispered the command, and Jackson looked startled. She hadn't noticed that in the litany of damage reports they'd received, no mention had been made of the main gun. It was still fully functional, but would take every last erg of energy the ship had. Gideon didn't think that this time he'd get power back in one minute as the designers promised, but that hardly mattered. In the one minute they were dead in space, the Drakh would blow them to pieces. But they were going to do that anyway, so he may as well take at least one of the enemy with him. Gideon wanted an honor guard when he entered Valhalla, or they might not let him in.

The Captain continued quietly, "Tell the fighters to scatter and hide. If they're lucky, someone will turn up looking for us before they run out of oxygen and power."

Jackson nodded, gave the orders to the fighters and powered up the main gun. Then they sat and watched as they slowly approached the enemy. In the back of Gideon's mind, a part of him was screaming at a God he wasn't sure existed.

[Why now? Why didn't you take me ten years ago when you had the chance? Why did you have to wait until I had so much more to lose? Does that give you some sort of perverse pleasure? To wait until I have some hope of happiness, some chance of a future that doesn't end in total despair, then snatch it all away? And just to add another little twist of agony you decide to take John, too. After all the battles he's fought, the prejudice, the pain, the loneliness, he finally finds the chance of happiness and that's not allowed. You grab it back, you take his life and the lives of everyone on this ship, right at the moment when we've done what we had to, achieved the impossible--saved humanity. None of that is good enough, is it? So you punish us by killing us all. Well, damn you. Damn you to hell! I'm going down fighting!]

The Drakh mothership was in range, obviously contemptuous of the wreck approaching it, as it hadn't even tried to fire on them.

"Fire main gun."

Gideon's last sight as the viewscreen grayed out was the Drakh mothership being speared on the end of the lightning bolt that emerged from the main gun. All power died in the Excalibur. She had given up the last of her energy in that one killing blast. The lights dimmed and the control panels in front of the Captain faded and died.

Gideon waited to die with his ship.

And waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened.

No fiery blast. No screaming death. Nothing. There was only darkness and silence until Gideon began to wonder if he'd died so quickly that he hadn't noticed, and this *was* the afterlife. The whisper from beside him banished that idea from his mind.

"Captain?" Jackson sounded scared.

Well, she had every right to be scared. Gideon almost laughed. He was more scared than he'd ever been in his life before and that included the time he'd spent hanging in space, waiting to die, after the Cerberus had been destroyed. But Captains weren't allowed to be afraid. Correction. Captains weren't allowed to show that they were afraid, so he swallowed hard and made sure his voice didn't quaver as he said, "Lieutenant?"

Her whisper sounded loud in the silence and darkness. "Are we still alive?"

Gideon laughed, but it sounded uncertain even to him. "I guess so. Just don't ask me how, OK? I haven't a clue."

A tiny glow in the panel in front of him alerted Gideon to the fact that power was returning to his ship. As the lights came back on, the viewscreen flickered and the image that appeared there spoke.

"That is such a typical male weapon, Captain. One big bang, then you're useless for anything afterwards."

Gideon started to laugh and this time it sounded slightly hysterical, so he clamped down on it. "Captain Ivanova, has anyone ever told you that you are the most beautiful woman in the galaxy?" He saw a momentary flicker of pain in her face and hurried on, "Where are you? How in the hell did you get here? Are you the reason we're not dead?"

Ivanova smiled. "My ship, the John Procter, and two other Warlock class destroyers were requested by President Sheridan to provide you with an honor escort home. We have another three Earthforce destroyers with us, and we are now busy whipping the asses off these Drakh bastards, who have messed up your ship. Yes, we're the reason you're not dead, and any time you feel like joining in the fight with that flying phallic symbol of yours, feel free. We took two of them out when we jumped in and took them by surprise. With the mothership you destroyed, that leaves seven of them to six of us, so if you'd care to try and get that main gun up again, we could do with the help."



Gideon grinned back at her. "I might be useless for a short while after I've fired my main gun, but you'd be amazed at how quickly I can get it up again."

Ivanova's grin was challenging. "Let's hope you can do more than talk, Captain. Ivanova out."

The screen went blank as Gideon turned to Jackson, who sat next to him with a grin nearly as wide as his. "I hope to God I haven't overstated our prowess. Do we have anything left, Lieutenant?"

Jackson nodded, so Gideon looked back at the tactical display, now able to see what had happened while they had been blacked out. The six Earthforce ships had jumped into normal space all around the Excalibur, setting up a defensive ring around their wounded colleague. Taking the Drakh totally by surprise, they had destroyed two of the enemy ships immediately, and Gideon could see the debris fields that marked where those ships had been. They had then joined battle with the Drakh.

The three Warlock class ships, the John Proctor, the Giles Corey and the George Burroughs, were holding their own, but the older ships, the Chiron, Demeter and Thetis, were struggling against stronger opponents. If the Excalibur could help, those ships needed it.

Using the little power he had left in thrusters, Gideon turned the Excalibur until it faced the Chiron's opponents. Two ships of the Drakh fleet were attacking the smaller ship. Gideon targeted his main gun on the larger of the two and fired. His ship seemed to die again, and this time it took even longer before power came back up. He just had to trust the other Earthforce ships to keep the enemy off his back while he was dead in space. Somehow they did, and when he could get readings up again, Gideon could see that another two shots would drain them of everything other than basic life support, at least until they could get the main engines repaired. So be it.

During their blackout, the Giles Corey had taken out another of the Drakh, so the enemy was now down to five ships. Now the Earthforce ships had the upper hand. Gideon fired again and waited out the silence and darkness that followed.



This time, when sensors returned, he could see that they'd won. Only two Drakh ships remained, and the Chiron, George Burroughs, and Thetis were closing in on one, while the John Proctor, Giles Corey, and Demeter had the other ship surrounded. Gideon watched in satisfaction as the two remaining enemies were destroyed. He hadn't had to totally drain his ship, he still had enough energy to run life support, maintain the sensors and even run the bullet cars.

Now he had to find out just how badly his ship and crew had been hurt. He tried to call Medbay to find out what was going on, but got no response. Finally, he made contact with his Master at Arms, who had led the Marines who had been sent in to sort out the disturbance. "Sergeant Healy? What's going on down there? We have wounded up here on the bridge and we need medics." From the corner of his eye, Gideon saw John Matheson stirring and sent silent thanks to the God he'd been cursing a short time before.

Healy's voice was hesitant. "I think you'd better get down here, Captain. And if any of the other ships has medics to spare, I think we'd better get them over here."

Gideon pushed upright from the helm station, using his left arm to help himself stand. During the battle and the euphoria of survival, he had almost forgotten his injuries, but now the pain came flooding back. All of his muscles had stiffened as he'd sat at the console, and every single one of them protested at his movement. Just to make his life complete, he had a thumping headache and his right shoulder was sending shooting pains through his chest, which made breathing difficult. Gideon wondered if he might have cracked some ribs when he'd hit the command console during his flight out of his chair. [No time to worry about that now. Whatever's broken can get fixed later.]

Jackson turned and looked up at him anxiously as he stood. "Do you need some help, Captain? Should I call someone?"

Gideon shook his head. "I'll live. Call the fighters back in, will you? Contact the John Proctor and

arrange for Captain Ivanova to start sending medics across here, and can you get the damage control teams working on trying to put the ship back together again? I know Lieutenant Matheson has been overseeing your training, but has he taken you through the drills you need?"

Jackson nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir. I can do that, sir. Is there anything else you need me to do?"

The Captain smiled at the young junior Lieutenant, grateful for her energy and enthusiasm. [I'm glad someone around here has some, because I'm clean out of both,] he thought as he told her to carry on supervising the repair work and call him in Medbay if she needed anything.

He turned to see that John Matheson had struggled up and was now sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. Gideon suspected that John's headache probably matched his own. He walked over to where John was sitting and squatted in front of his XO, groaning slightly as the muscles in his back and legs communicated just how much they hated being moved.

Matheson looked up and tried to focus on his Captain, but Gideon could see that the Lieutenant was still half out of it. "John? Can you hear me? I think you have a concussion and I probably shouldn't move you, but I don't think we're going to get you any treatment up here for a while. So if you can stand, I want to get you to Medbay. Do you understand?"

The XO nodded, then grimaced before speaking very quietly. "Yes, sir. Just don't yell, OK?"

Gideon laughed softly, then stood upright and held out his left hand. "Come on, Lieutenant, we've got work to do. You can't lie around here all day, you know."

Matheson reached for his Captain's hand, pulled himself upright, then let go quickly. Focusing on Gideon again, he wiped some of the blood out of his eyes and hurriedly apologized. "Sorry, Captain. I couldn't help it, when we touched I picked up..." he trailed off in dismay.

"It's OK. I don't think we have many secrets left between us. Can you walk?" Gideon knew that John would have picked up on his pain and the guilt that was nearly overwhelming him, but there was nothing he could do about that. As his XO wobbled slightly, the Captain held him up with his good arm, careful not to make skin contact again.

As they staggered towards the exit, Gideon could see other members of the original bridge crew stirring, being attended by their colleagues, but he could also see three bodies that were totally still. Telling himself that there was nothing he could do, that by getting down to Medbay and finding out what the problem was, he was doing what he was best qualified to do, he half-carried Matheson off the bridge.

Matheson sat on the bullet car, holding his head in his hands. The way it felt right now, he thought it might fall off if he didn't support it in some way. He was still having trouble focusing both his eyes and his thoughts, and was desperately trying to make sense of what was going on around him. It didn't help that his mental screens were not functioning properly, and his head was full of the noise created by the random thoughts of everyone on the Excalibur.

The XO looked across at his Captain, who was leaning back against the wall of the bullet car, his eyes closed. The left side of Gideon's face was a mass of bruising and swelling, and a cut on his temple had bled unchecked down his cheek and neck, soaking into his sweater, the dark red of the blood showing

clearly against the brighter red of the uniform. His right arm hung limp at his side and Matheson knew that, at the very least, the shoulder was dislocated, from the angle at which it stuck out. He could feel Gideon's pain from where he sat and wondered how his Captain had kept going for so long when he was in such agony.

Matheson looked back at the floor and tried to pull himself together. Waves of nausea kept sweeping over him, and he knew that he was suffering from concussion. As they had staggered to the bullet car, Gideon had given him a brief description of what had happened after the Excalibur had jumped back to normal space. The XO had tried to take it all in, but still wasn't quite sure what had happened in Medbay. Something about the Drazi they had rescued, but he couldn't figure out why the medics hadn't come to the bridge.

For the moment, Matheson tried to forget that puzzle and concentrated on quelling his nausea. Using the disciplines he'd learned in the Psi Corps, he thought he'd succeeded until the bullet car started to decelerate. The motion was enough to make him feel seriously sick, but he was determined that Gideon wouldn't have to half-carry him again. His Captain had enough problems without having to worry about a First Officer who couldn't stand on his own two feet.

As the bullet car came to a halt, Matheson pushed himself upright and watched Gideon do the same. He waved his Captain away as he offered his one good arm in support. "I'm fine." Even in his current state, Matheson could see the skeptical look on Gideon's face. "OK, so I'm not fine, but I can walk as far as Medbay. Lead the way."

He followed his Captain off the bullet car and down the corridor to Medbay, making sure he stayed in the rear so Gideon wouldn't see him having to put his hand out and lean on the wall to help himself stay on his feet.

Gideon walked ahead of John, well aware that his XO was using the wall for support, but also knowing that John's pride demanded that he make his own way. Arriving at the entrance to Medbay, he was met by Sergeant Healy, who moved quickly to stop him from entering.

Healy looked uninjured, but his complexion was pale and his face drawn. He spoke quickly and quietly. "Before you go in there, Captain, I should warn you that it's a mess. I went in with my men and stayed long enough to check that there's no one left alive, then we got out. We're going to need a full forensics team to go over the place before we can start cleaning up, but there's no one on board qualified to do that now. We're going to have to get help from the other ships."

The Captain tried to take in what Healy was saying to him. Forensics? Well, yes, if some of his people had been killed in there by the Drazi, then technically, it was a murder scene and would have to be fully recorded and documented. But why did they need help from the other ships for that? He had several medical staff who were qualified to carry out such a recording, surely they couldn't all be...

Gideon felt sick, suddenly realizing the enormity of what had happened down here. Only half aware that Matheson had arrived at his side, he spoke quietly to the Sergeant. "Open the doors. I need to do a basic visual inspection for my report to Earthforce. Then we'll seal the place until we can get a forensics team assembled." As Healy went to open the doors, Gideon reached out and touched the Sergeant's arm to attract his attention. "You're sure there's no one alive in there?"

Healy shook his head. "We checked. We picked up a couple of medical scanners and took readings. No

one survived."

Gideon swallowed hard and nodded for the Sergeant to open the doors, bracing himself for what lay beyond.

The first thing that hit him was the smell. The overpowering stench of death flowed over him and he heard John start to retch beside him. Then he looked into the room and saw red--literally. Everything he could see was red. Blood coated the floor, the walls, the furniture, the computer consoles--everything. The Medbay was awash with blood. Gideon had seen some appalling sights in his life, helped treat friends hit by PPG blasts, tied tourniquets around limbs half-torn off in battle, but he'd never seen anything this bad.

The bodies he could see from the doorway were slumped in every position imaginable, the humans mainly showing signs of stab wounds to the chest, although some had obviously had their throats slit. Every Drazi he could see had died the same way. Their throats had been cut, deeply, savagely, in some cases deep enough so they were almost decapitated, and Gideon couldn't understand how they had managed to do that to themselves. But it was obvious that they had done so, as every one of them had a knife either still clasped in their hand or close by.

The Captain felt as if he'd been paralyzed. Time seemed to have slowed as he looked through that door into hell. He couldn't move, and he wasn't even sure if he was breathing. A remote part of his mind still functioned and he heard himself thinking, [Shock. This is shock. It's OK. It's normal. Don't panic. You can handle this.]

Gideon wanted to laugh hysterically at his own thoughts. [Handle this? I can handle it? How can I handle it when I did this to them? This is my fault, my responsibility. I let those bastards in and I didn't protect my people. That's my job, that's what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to keep my crew safe. I'm not supposed to let them get butchered like animals in an abattoir.] That last thought nearly finished him. The scene in front of him started to blur, and he barely managed to whisper to Healy, "Close the door. Seal it."

Taking deep breaths, Gideon reached out his left hand and leaned on the wall, his head down and his eyes closed while he worked on getting himself back under control. He was half-aware of Healy holding Matheson up, while John vomited repeatedly. [Nice going, Matt, you brought John down here to get him fixed up and you've damn near finished him off.] The shaft of self-hatred and contempt that accompanied the thought gave him the strength he needed to straighten up and turn to Healy.

"Sergeant. Get one of your men to help Lieutenant Matheson to his quarters." He turned and smiled weakly as John protested that he was all right. "John, you're very far from all right."

Matheson straightened and pulled himself away from Healy's support. "I'm in no worse condition than you are, Captain. I'll manage."

Gideon shook his head. "The fact that it's *your* breakfast decorating the floor right now proves you wrong. Go to your quarters and rest. That's an order. I'll send a medic there as soon as the real emergencies are dealt with, then you can come back and relieve me. OK?" The latter was a sop to John's pride. Gideon knew damn well that as soon as a medic saw John in his current condition, he was going to be signed off from duty for days.

Matheson managed a shaky half-smile and salute. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

One of Healy's men steadied the Lieutenant as he left the corridor. Gideon watched him go, knowing that there was only one reason that his own breakfast wasn't sitting on the deck next to John's. He hadn't eaten breakfast.

The Captain turned to Healy and ordered him to have Medbay sealed and to put a guard on it until the forensic team arrived. Then he staggered to the nearest communication panel, and put a call through to the John Proctor. When Captain Ivanova came on screen, he explained what had happened on board, arranged for a medical investigation team to be assembled, and for his more seriously injured crew to be shuttled over to the other ships.

When he'd done everything he could think of, Gideon straightened and spoke formally. "Captain Ivanova, as you're the senior Captain present, I'm turning myself over to you for remand. A Board of Inquiry will need to establish the degree of negligence involved in this incident, but Earthforce regulations require you to suspend me from duty, pending that Board." He relaxed slightly as he continued, "The problem is that I have no one over here to whom I can pass command. My First Officer is injured and I've sent him off duty. My Second Officer was at the helm when we were attacked, and he's dead. Can you send someone to take over?"

Gideon watched as Ivanova's eyes narrowed. "I'll send someone over, but not to put you on remand. Your injuries need attention, Captain, and we'll discuss the issue of negligence later. For the moment, when Lieutenant Grigoria arrives, he'll relieve you of command while you obtain medical treatment, then we'll see where we go from there. Ivanova out." The screen went blank before Gideon could protest.



Having made his way back to the bridge, Gideon spent the next half-hour working with Jackson on putting his ship and crew back together. The damage the Excalibur had received was significant and would take days to fix. The damage to his crew was worse. Apart from the Medbay massacre, twenty-three crew members had died when the jump point was detonated. Over fifty percent of the survivors had received significant injuries ranging from broken limbs to serious burns. The rest had minor injuries, but there was hardly a person on board who didn't need some form of medical treatment.

The other Earthforce ships had sent every nurse and doctor they could spare and seventy-four of Gideon's people were being evacuated to their Medbays. Engineers from every ship were swarming on board the Excalibur, working with the walking wounded of his own crew to start repairs.

A medic arrived on the bridge, apparently with direct instructions from Ivanova to treat Gideon before she did anything else. The Captain sat quietly in his command chair while she ran a regenerator over his face, feeling the headache that had pounded at him for an eternity fading under the gentle vibrations emitted by the instrument. The medic had just started treating his arm and shoulder when Lieutenant Grigoria arrived. A swarthy, short and stocky man, Gideon was relieved to see that Ivanova had sent him her First Officer. He could relax knowing this man would take care of his ship and his crew. Quietly asking the medic to wait a moment, Gideon stood to greet his replacement and hand over command. As he did so, the world blurred and grayed out, and he slipped into unconsciousness.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three

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