

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

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Matthew is suspicious.

Chapter 1

July 2269

The Ranger sat in the communication center, in the President's office at Tuzanor. Since he'd been crippled in a battle with the Drakh two years earlier, he'd been put on light duty, and manning the communications equipment was the perfect role for a Ranger who could no longer range.



It was also the perfect job for his other Masters--the Masters who controlled him through the Keeper they had attached to him when they had captured and tortured him. The Ranger often thought it would have been better to have died under that torture rather than live under the rule of the Keeper, but the choice had been taken away from him on that day two years before, and on every day since. The Keeper didn't often intervene in his actions, but when it did, he had no option but to obey. Now was one of those times.

He carefully recorded the incoming message and sent it through to the President's office. Then he sent a

copy to his other Masters.

Drowning in self-hatred, the Minbari Ranger once again tried to think of ways to die that his Keeper couldn't stop. The Keeper's laugh echoed in his skull, making it clear that he had no hope of success.

[Home, we're going home!] The thought raced around and around in Gideon's head as the Excalibur rushed through hyperspace. He sat in his chair on the bridge, trying to concentrate on the fuel consumption and crew efficiency reports on his data pad, but failed miserably. He could barely get through a line of text before his pride in his crew and their achievements burst out of him again. [We did it! We found the cure!]

The quest that had taken over two and a half years of searching, constantly aware of how many were dying every day on Earth, was nearly behind them. In a few days they would be home, [Home!] and they could start curing people. More accurately, they could stop people from catching the plague again *after* they had been cured. The doctors on Earth had been able to cure people for several months now, using the equipment the Excalibur had brought back from Eriadne, but unless those people were removed from Earth and its contaminated atmosphere, they were immediately re-infected.

Now the Excalibur was bringing home the missing piece, the viral screen that could be used to permanently prevent infection by the Drakh plague. On Theta 49, with the co-operation of Robert Black and his colonists, they had finally found the virus they could adapt to become a permanent screen. In gratitude, the Excalibur had stopped at Orion VII for the minutes necessary to transfer some of Black's people to a shuttle, those few who hadn't wished to stay on Theta 49. Then the Excalibur had headed for Earth at top speed, and had now completed five of the nine days it would take them to get home.

The Captain had ordered the crew to full battle alert, and they had stayed on that status since entering hyperspace, but the crew didn't seem to mind. The sense of jubilation that infected everyone on board was almost intoxicating. So many of his crew had families and friends on Earth that nothing could suppress their joy in being the ones who had succeeded in finding the cure.

All too aware that they carried the future of Earth on this single ship, Gideon had ordered a communications blackout as soon as they left the Orion system. If the Drakh found out their location, Gideon was sure that they'd do anything and everything they could to stop his ship from making it home. The cargo they now carried was far too precious to risk for any reason.

Gideon's experience with Senator Redway and the plumber who had accompanied him had made the Captain wary of any potential leak of information that could alert the Drakh to the Excalibur's location. Gideon's lips quirked into a smile as he thought, not for the first time, that plumbers were supposed to fix leaks, not create them. The Captain had sent one carefully coded message to President Sheridan's office, then closed down all outgoing communications. That had hurt like hell, because he could no longer send his daily messages to Deborah. He missed her so much it hurt, and he still hadn't figured out a way for them to be together. He was rapidly coming to the conclusion that maybe John Matheson was right, maybe the only solution was to leave Earthforce and join their families on Eriadne.

Looking at John reminded Gideon of the promise he'd made to his XO after their last visit to Eriadne and the birth of their children. "...we're going to find a way to make it happen. Just give me some time, OK? Don't rush into decisions that you'll have a lifetime to regret." John was relying on his Captain to

find a solution to their problems, and at this point, the Captain wasn't sure he could do that. Sometimes when they were on the bridge together, Gideon would see a look of sadness and longing on John's face that nearly broke his Captain's heart. Gideon knew that John missed his family as much as he did, and knew he *had* to find a way for them all to be together again.

Gideon treasured every message and picture he received from Deborah, showing him how his son was growing every day, [And he *is* improving with age. Maybe he won't scare small children and animals when he grows up,] and he especially enjoyed the ones showing him how Deborah had regained the weight she'd lost when she was pregnant, and recovered her spectacular figure. In her last message, she'd done a slow striptease for the camera, so he could see for himself how her stomach was flat again, although her breasts were still larger than they had been.

Gideon shifted uncomfortably in his chair, as he felt himself becoming aroused just at the memory of that message. He'd made absolutely certain that no copies of *that* one were recorded into the comm. system! Deborah had ended her message by telling him that she understood why he couldn't reply, but to please hurry back as she missed him. [*She misses me?* How the hell does she think I feel! I don't send her pictures of *me* naked!] The thought of his Communications team's reaction if they intercepted such a message brought a brief smile to the Captain's lips, just as his XO turned to look at him.

"Gas, Captain?" John Matheson's teasing smile showed that he'd never let Gideon forget that excuse.

"No. Just planning out the next battle drill I'm going to put you all through. I thought this time, Lieutenant, you might like to lead a troop through the recycling plant, so you can surprise Jackson and her people on the flight deck. How does that appeal?"

Matheson's quiet moan of dismay gave Gideon far more pleasure than he knew he ought to feel. [That'll teach you.] He was just about to continue torturing his First Officer for his own pleasure and the entertainment of the bridge crew, when he saw Matheson's hand move to the earpiece of his headset.

"We're receiving a distress call, Captain." Matheson paused, listening. Gideon waited impatiently for more details. "It's a Drazi passenger transport. Forty passengers and crew on board. They've had total engine failure in hyperspace, can't jump back to normal space, and are drifting off the beacon. They seem to be caught in some sort of hyperspace vortex, which is pulling them in."

Gideon stood abruptly. "How long until they lose contact with the beacon? And how long for us to get to them?"

Matheson spoke quietly into his headset and waited for a response. "They'll be out of range of the beacon in four hours, and it will take us three hours to reach them." He looked up at his CO, frowning. "But if we change course to go after them, by the time we reach them, stop, get them on board, get back up to speed and resume our original course, we'll have lost over half a day."



The Captain frowned. He'd never ignored a distress signal, had never left anyone behind, but how many people would die on Earth because of that delay? Could Gideon risk those lives to save forty Drazi? But how could the Excalibur leave, knowing that by doing so they were condemning those forty souls to die? Gideon remembered a time when Max Eilerson had asked him if he would sacrifice a few hundred Narns to save Earth. The Captain hadn't answered the question then and had hoped he would never have to answer it. Now it looked as

if he would have to make his choice. Could Gideon allow forty Drazi to die, knowing he could have saved them? Could he justify their inevitable deaths by pleading that many more lives *might* be saved by his arriving at Earth a few hours earlier? Gideon looked at his XO, "Is there no one else in range? No one else who can help them?"

Matheson shook his head sadly, obviously aware of the dilemma faced by his Captain. "No, Sir. In four hours, they'll be irretrievably lost."

Gideon took a deep breath and decided. To hell with the math. "Change course, Lieutenant. We're going after them." He then made a second decision. "I'm going down to Medbay. I'll be there if you need me."

If a sense of elation pervaded the Excalibur, then the source of that jubilation was Medbay. As Gideon walked in, he couldn't help but smile at the grins everyone there wore. For a moment, he could have sworn that Deborah must be there, projecting happiness, as there didn't seem to be any other explanation for the euphoria that permeated the whole place.

The Captain walked through to Dr. Chambers' office, nodding at members of her team as he went, returning their smiles. Everyone there knew what a miracle they had achieved. They had found the cure, and they were taking it home. Gideon still thought another miracle had occurred with the Excalibur getting away from Theta 49 without murder being done, either to his crew or to Black's colonists. The conditions they had all worked under had led to almost intolerable pressure on everyone, and friction between the medical team and the colonists had built to explosive heights. Somehow, they'd kept it together, somehow they carried on working, and somehow they'd achieved their goal. If ever a group of people deserved to feel happy and proud, it was Sarah Chambers and her medical team.

Gideon found Sarah at her desk, still working, still searching. He knew that she felt they hadn't done enough, that the cure they had found wasn't the *right* cure. Since the deaths of her sister and niece two months before, Sarah had been driving herself to the limit, and perhaps a little beyond. Gideon was deeply concerned about her, and had shared those concerns with Alwyn, asking the elderly Technomage to watch out for Sarah, to try to get her to slow down. Alwyn had agreed to do his best, but from what the Captain could see, his Chief Medical Officer was driving herself as hard as ever.

She looked up as Gideon entered her office and gave him a brief, distracted smile before looking back at the data pad in front of her, saying, "Is it urgent, Captain? I'm rather busy right..." she trailed off as Gideon reached over and took the data pad from her, turning it face down on her desk.

"Yes, it is urgent, but not so urgent that you need to kill yourself. When did you last go off duty? When did you last sleep? Sarah, I need a CMO who isn't running on empty. So put the data pad aside, lean back, close your eyes and relax for two minutes, while I get us both coffee. That's an order."

Gideon smiled, then turned to go to the main Medbay and get the coffee.

As he turned, he nearly ran into Alwyn, who had been standing immediately behind him. Gideon started, then said, "I used to tell Galen that I was going to put a bell on him, so I could hear him coming. Looks like I'm going to have to do the same to you."



Alwyn's smile was slow and full of malicious promise. "I would love to see you try, Captain. I promise I'll send all the important parts of you back to Demon, for her to treasure."

Gideon smiled weakly and slid past the Technomage, saying, "Don't go anywhere. I need to speak to both of you. I'll be right back."

Returning with three cups of coffee, he found Sarah leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed, while Alwyn stood behind her, massaging her shoulders. Lifting an eyebrow in Alwyn's direction, he got a stony glare back. Gideon knew that the Technomage had what could be called 'feelings' towards his doctor, and he could see that Sarah was fond of the old man, in a joking, tolerant sort of way. The Captain hoped that one day Chambers might feel more than that, as he was sure that Alwyn could provide her with the friendship, comfort, and support that she desperately needed. He told himself to mind his own business for once, and handed out coffee.

Gideon perched on the edge of Sarah's desk and looked at the Technomage. "Alwyn, I need a favor."

Alwyn snorted in amusement. "Hardly a novelty, is it? I seem to have been doing you favors since we met, Captain. I still haven't sent you my bill for delivering your son."

Gideon smiled faintly and shook his head. "No joke this time, Alwyn. I need you to leave, right now, and I need you to take Sarah with you." He quieted Chambers' startled protest and went on to explain about the Drazi distress signal. He started to pace the office as he continued, "The timing stinks. Just when we're on our way home with the final piece of the cure, we get dragged off on a mercy mission. Well, call me suspicious, but I get an uncomfortable feeling about this sort of synchronicity. It may be coincidence, but my gut tells me to be careful. So I want you two to copy every bit of data we have on the cure, everything you need to deliver it to Earth, and I want you off this ship."

The Captain turned to Alwyn who had been listening carefully. The Technomage had been nodding his agreement to Gideon's suggestion. "Alwyn, whatever happens to the Excalibur, you have to get Sarah and that data back to Earth. I know that your ship isn't as fast as the Excalibur, so if this is just a straightforward rescue mission, we'll catch up with you about a day out from Sol system, and we can all go home together. I hope to God that's what happens, and that I'm just being paranoid, but I can't take any risks with a cargo as precious as this."

He looked straight into the Technomage's eyes, knowing that Alwyn would understand his meaning. The precious cargo wasn't just the data, but also the doctor who had worked it all out. There was no one else in the galaxy who would take care of Sarah as carefully and as well as Alwyn. Gideon had considered sending Sarah on ahead in a shuttle or a fighter, but those vehicles could only exit hyperspace through a jump gate and would be slower than Alwyn's ship. Anyway, the Captain was sure that the Technomage could protect Sarah far better than any escort the Excalibur could give her.

Alwyn nodded seriously, accepting the burden of trust that Gideon had just placed on him, then looked

down at Sarah, who sat in front of the Mage, his hands still resting gently on her shoulders. "Well, my dear, it looks like we're off on a journey together. How long will it take you to pack?"

Sarah smiled and lifted her hand to rest over Alwyn's on her shoulder. "About an hour to copy all the data and two minutes to throw some essentials into a bag." She looked across at Gideon, who was watching the Technomage's face as he looked down at where Sarah's hand rested on his own. That face was suffused with such longing and sadness that Gideon could only hope that one day these two people might be more than friends. He started to leave the office when Sarah called him back.

"Captain? Are you sure about this? Send the data with Alwyn by all means, but I should be here with my team. The Drazi may be hurt or injured, in which case, you're going to need me."

Gideon shook his head as he stood. "Earth needs you more, Sarah. You have a great team here, and you've trained them well. They can cope on a straightforward rescue mission. In all probability, we'll pick you up in a couple of days, and they'll be telling you what a wonderful job they did without you." He paused at the door on his way out and said, smiling, "Now get going. I want you off my ship in an hour."

The Captain walked back toward the bullet car, satisfied that he could now tackle the rescue mission, knowing that the cure was safely on its way to Earth. Whatever happened to him and his ship, he knew that Alwyn would get Sarah safely home.

The Drazi ship hung on the edge of a hyperspace vortex that was slowly but surely dragging them into its heart. In the three hours it had taken the Excalibur to reach them, the Drazi had drifted well off the beacon. In another hour, they would have gone beyond the limits of the beacon's signal and would have been lost forever. Matheson had spent the last hour or so making sure that everything was prepared for the rescue. The shuttles were prepped for take-off as soon as they got within range, ready to evacuate the passengers. The fighter wings were ready for launch to provide escort and Medbay was standing by to take in survivors.

The XO had been a little surprised when his Captain had given the order to put the fighters on stand by. It wasn't standard practice for a rescue mission, but he understood Gideon's concerns. Maybe they were *both* being paranoid, but Matheson agreed that the timing of that distress call was suspicious. He'd been relieved when Gideon had told him about Alwyn's departure with Dr. Chambers and all the data they had on the viral screen, and it had amused him a little that his usually somewhat reckless Captain was being so cautious. There had certainly been no need to say 'turnips' to him on this occasion, which gave John cause for mild regret. He always enjoyed his Captain's reaction to the word 'turnip', especially when it was merited. Matheson admonished himself. He knew that Gideon never took unnecessary risks when it came to really important issues, such as the safety of the crew or their mission. It was only his own neck, and sometimes that of his XO, with which he gambled.

The voices droned in John's headset, giving him continuous data about the state of the ship, and the hyperspace surrounding it. It was the XO's job to filter all that data and report the important things to his Captain. He held the headset to his ear, concentrating, then turned to Gideon, who sat waiting in his Captain's chair, and said, "We're in range. Rescue can commence on your order."

Gideon stood and barked, "Launch fighters." He paused for a few seconds, watching the images of the Star Furies appear on the viewscreen, positioning themselves in a defensive perimeter around the Excalibur and the Drazi ship, then said, "Launch shuttles."

Matheson listened carefully for a few moments, then reported, "Shuttles away." He reminded Gideon of the plan to which they had agreed. "Shuttles 2 and 3 will make one journey each. Shuttle 1 will have to return to pick up a second load." It was unfortunate that the three shuttles they had on board did not have the capacity to take all forty Drazi in one journey, but they had assigned Trace Miller as pilot of Shuttle 1 and he could fly better and faster than any other pilot on board. He would get the first load back and be out again before Shuttles 2 and 3 returned.

Gideon nodded at Matheson's reminder and called for Communications to open a channel to the Drazi vessel. They had maintained communications silence so far, not wishing to alert anyone to their whereabouts, but now they needed to let the Drazi ship know their plans. Matheson waited for confirmation then turned to his Captain, "Channel open, Captain." The Drazi Captain's face appeared in the view screen at the front of the bridge.

His first words were aggressive, just as Matheson had anticipated. The Drazi language didn't have a word for discretion, showing that the race was totally unfamiliar with the concept. "Who are you? Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"



Gideon gave back as good as he got. "This is the Earth Alliance Ship Excalibur, Matthew Gideon commanding, and if our presence offends you, we can leave. If you want us to stay, open another channel and my First Officer will give instructions to whomever you want to put in charge of your rescue. Then you and I can argue about how much notice you require before you allow us to save you."

The Drazi glared, but waved at one of the crew who was visible behind him, and a voice started talking in Matheson's ear. Well, ranting would have been a better word, but the XO soon cut through his words and started making the necessary arrangements with what turned out to be the Drazi pilot.

Matheson was half aware that Gideon was keeping the argument with the Drazi Captain going, exchanging insults and threats, as was necessary to gain the Drazi's respect and cooperation. As a race, they were suspicious to the point of paranoia, extremely aggressive and they only respected people who would stand up to them and show themselves to be just as aggressive. [Perhaps we should get Mr. Eilerson up here to negotiate. He and the Drazi are a perfect match.] John quickly suppressed the smile that went with that thought.

By the time Shuttle 1 was docking with the disabled Drazi ship, Matheson had agreed on an evacuation plan with the pilot, and Gideon had won the grudging respect of the Drazi Captain, who ungraciously agreed to allow them to rescue him and his people. The pilot gave Matheson data on the condition of the passengers and crew as they started to load Shuttle 1 with those people who could move fastest.

Gideon, meanwhile, started negotiating with the Drazi on the fee they were going to charge for the rescue. Matheson knew that the fee would never be levied or collected, but he also knew that the Drazi would be deeply offended if their rescue were offered free of charge. That would imply that their lives were worth nothing. By demanding an outrageous sum for the costs of the rescue, Gideon had soothed the Drazis' pride, and ensured their continued cooperation in a fast and smooth evacuation.

The Lieutenant now had data that he needed to give to his Captain, so turned to attract his attention.

Gideon cut the Drazi Captain off, saying he'd consider the latest offer made. He turned to Matheson and nodded for him to continue.

"Shuttle 1 is on its way back, Shuttle 2 is just docking with the Drazi ship. Of the forty passengers and crew, the ten on Shuttle 1 are the only ones relatively fit and uninjured. When the engines failed, life support went with them. The atmosphere in the ship has become contaminated with coolants and everyone on board has respiratory problems to some degree--even the Captain, though he's hiding it well. They'll all need to be treated in Medbay as soon as we get them on board."

Gideon nodded again. "Brief the Medbay team we have standing by outside the landing bay. They'll need to make sure they have the appropriate equipment on hand, and get as much information about the nature of the contamination as you can."

Matheson started to carry out his orders as the Captain waved at Communications to re-establish his channel to the Drazi ship. The XO heard Gideon's opening words, then concentrated on his own job.

"Well, Captain Grensa, it looks like the fee for your rescue just went up. We'll need to figure in the cost of the medical treatment."

Gideon sat back in his chair when he'd finished haggling with the Drazi Captain, thinking while he watched the rescue progress. If this was a Drakh trap, just how had it been set? Grensa had told him that the Drazi ship had left their home world two days before. If the Drakh had somehow intercepted his message to Sheridan, that would have given them three days to work out the Excalibur's most direct route home, identify a ship that would be traveling in that sector of hyperspace, and sabotage it. The timing was tight, but not impossible. So despite the smoothness with which everything had run so far, this could still be a trap.

As long as they had shuttles moving between the two ships, the Excalibur was effectively dead in space. They couldn't run unless they were willing to leave the shuttles behind, and Gideon was sure that the Drakh knew enough about him by now to know that he would never do that. He suspected that they knew enough about him to have set up this whole situation, knowing that he would find it impossible to ignore a distress call.

The Captain had done everything he could to prepare for the trap. All his guns were manned and on standby, his fighters were out and on full alert. The message buoy with every piece of data, right up to the point of their starting the rescue, was ready. It would be launched in the event of the destruction of the ship, waiting silently until it detected an Earthforce vessel, then signaling its presence. That buoy held his farewell message to Deborah and his son, with a request to Earthforce to deliver it to her on Eriadne. While the thought of dying and never seeing her again was bad enough, the thought of her never knowing what had happened to him was far worse. Gideon desperately wanted her to know that he hadn't deserted her, that he would never have abandoned her to raise their son alone, so he'd snatched a few moments to record the message and included it in the buoy. John had done the same for Luke and Lily. It was all they could do for their families.

The Captain watched as Shuttles 2 and 3 returned with their passengers and Shuttle 1 docked with the Drazi ship to take on the last set of survivors. As soon as Trace brought home that last shuttle, Gideon planned to slam shut the landing bay doors and get the hell out of that sector of hyperspace as fast as the engines could take him. He had a bad feeling about this.

Matheson turned to look at him and reported, "Spatial disturbances detected, Captain. Jump points opening."

[Shit!] Gideon checked quickly on the sensor readings; the shuttle was halfway back to the ship. The Excalibur wasn't going anywhere for at least another five minutes. [You'd better move your ass, Trace!] The bastards must have known exactly where his ship was all the time and had been sitting in normal space, waiting for the time when the Excalibur couldn't move and was most vulnerable. Well, the timing was a little off. They had two out of the three shuttles back, thirty of the Drazi on board, and just had to hold out for a few more minutes before they could run for their lives.

"How many?" Gideon could only pray that they hadn't had time to get a whole fleet into position to attack him. If they had, his ship and his crew were all dead.

"Five." John's voice was flat as he delivered the news. Bad enough, but it could have been worse. They still had a fighting chance. Gideon watched as the sensors showed the five Drakh ships jumping in at strategic points around him. Shuttle 1 had just reached the landing bay doors. The Excalibur started firing at the enemy, and the fighters moved to intercept the smaller craft the Drakh destroyers had launched.



"As soon as that shuttle's backside is inside the landing bay doors, shut them and move. Don't wait for Trace to set it down. We'll have to rely on the gravimetric fields to stop it from crashing into the walls and ripping us to pieces. Tell Trace what we're doing and go!" Gideon barked out the orders and followed them with a heading that would take them directly into the path of the largest Drakh ship. As soon as he had confirmation that the shuttle was inside, he gave the next order. "Jump engines on line, full power to thrusters. Ramming speed--straight down their throats. Bring the fighters into tight formation. Keep them close."

With all guns still firing, and the hull ringing and shaking with the hits the Excalibur was taking, she started to move toward the Drakh mothership. Gideon hung onto his seat, checking his command console to make sure that all his fighters had moved in close, and when they were moving at top speed and seconds away from collision with the Drakh ship, he yelled, "Jump!"

The jump point opened in front of them, and they dropped through into normal space, leaving their pursuers behind--for now. Gideon knew that he'd only bought them a few moments, but he was going to make the most of them to get as much space between him and his pursuers as he could get. As soon as his jump engines were recharged, he planned to dive back into hyperspace and run as fast as he could.

What Gideon saw on his console made him groan in despair. The Drakh had only sent half of their forces into hyperspace after him. There were five more destroyers waiting for him in normal space. The Excalibur's sudden burst of speed in hyperspace had taken her outside the attack formation that had been waiting for them, and only that unexpected maneuver had saved them from instant destruction. Coming out of hyperspace at a different position than that the Drakh had anticipated meant it took the enemy a few seconds to shift into position and fire into the heart of the jump point behind the Excalibur.

The explosion behind them as the jump point detonated threw the Excalibur end over end like a toy. Their accompanying fighters were scattered like dandelion seeds on the wind. Gideon felt himself flying

out of his chair, felt the sickening pain in his right shoulder as it crunched into his command console, a pain that faded almost instantly as the left side of his head smacked into the deck that rose up to meet him. Then he felt nothing.

Janie Ferguson helped the last of the Drazis into Medbay. They had run out of beds, and the less incapacitated of the survivors sat on the floor, coughing raspily, while those more severely hurt were being treated on the beds. Taking forty patients at once strained Medbay's capacity to the limit, and they had called in every member of the medical team, on or off duty, to help cope. Janie had felt very proud when Sarah Chambers had left her in charge of Medbay, but she was now beginning to worry about her ability to cope. The whole ship rocking under the blasts of the attack wasn't helping them treat the injured Drazis.

Janie was trying to get a respirator mask on the Drazi Captain when he looked her straight in the eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry." She couldn't understand what he was apologizing for, until she felt the sharp pain and looked down to see the knife buried in her chest. Her last thought was that he must have had some knowledge of human anatomy, as he had stabbed her straight in the heart.

Captain Grensa looked around the room, awash with the blood of their human victims, and howled in despair. He screamed in anguish, "Are you satisfied? Now will you let us die?"

The voice in his head laughed back at him. [You have served your purpose and your Masters well.]

That voice had been in his head constantly since his ship had been captured two days before. He, his crew and his passengers, had all been taken aboard a Drakh ship and held down while 'things' had been attached to them. Since that time, his body and his mind had been relentlessly controlled. Grensa had fought the control at every moment, but the thing attached to his neck had never let go, never relaxed for a moment.

Grensa had watched, unable to do anything, as the thing that controlled his body had moved his ship to a point in hyperspace. Watched as members of his crew had sabotaged their own engines and released coolants into the air, chemicals that would kill them all in a few days. Watched as he, himself, had sent out the distress signal that he had known was designed to lure someone to this point, into the trap the Drakh had prepared.

Grensa had listened to his own voice, haggling with the Excalibur's Captain over the price of their rescue, and despaired. He couldn't warn them, he couldn't do anything other than watch his own body being used by the alien monster that now controlled it.

He had thought it couldn't get worse, but when they finally arrived in the Excalibur's Medbay, it did. The whole ship had been ringing and shaking under the attack but the humans still tried to care for him and his people. Grensa knew that the Drazi would never have placed human lives above their own safety, and he had felt ashamed. That shame had turned to horror as he'd seen his own hand shifting inside his jacket and withdrawing the knife that had been hidden there. A part of his mind had registered the fact that any more sophisticated weapon would have been detected by the scanners a ship such as the Excalibur would inevitably have in its landing bay. But a non-metallic knife went undetected, and it was all that had been needed to kill the unarmed, defenseless human woman who had been trying to help him.

When the humans were dead, Grensa had watched as his body had been moved to a computer console and his fingers moved over the panel. He hadn't understood the detail of the commands he had input, but he could see that he had fed some sort of virus into the computer, a virus that had spread and deleted every piece of data it encountered. The virus seemed to focus itself solely on medical data, leaving all other aspects of the ship's operation untouched, avoiding any alarm systems that might have detected its progress.

When the medical databanks were completely wiped, Grensa howled his despair and looked around the Medbay, seeing the other Drazis looking back, their faces showing their shame and horror at what they'd been forced to do. Every human in the place lay dead, by their hands. Grensa looked down to see his own hand, still clutching the bloody knife, moving toward his throat. A quick glance around the room showed him that every other Drazi present was being moved in the same way.

The voice in his head spoke softly. [Yes, you can die. In fact, you must die. It may comfort you to know that we die with you.]

The knife slashed across his throat, and Grensa fell to the floor, watching his life's blood pumping out, to mix with the human blood that already coated everything. He felt the thing on his neck detach itself and watched as it scurried into the pool of red in front of him. It stopped, flexed its tentacles once, then dissolved in front of his eyes, until nothing remained.

Grensa's last thought was that no one would ever know that he wasn't responsible for the atrocity that had been committed here.

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three

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