

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Three - Part 3: Hope

by [The Space Witches](#)



Memories are all that John can hold on to... memories and hope

Chapter 1

August 3rd 2269

I fell back onto my bunk, closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths. It had been another long, exhausting day, with ship repairs still in full swing. The Drakh fleet attack a couple of weeks before had been too much even for the Excalibur's hull, which was made of a plasteel crystalline alloy capable of refracting 80% of any energy weapon used against it.

I chuckled and opened my eyes again, shaking my head. Even off duty, I couldn't stop quoting the 'driver's' manual.

"First Officer's personal log, continued."

"I don't quite know where to begin. The week since we arrived home with our honor guard and rescuers, led by Captain Ivanova, has been hectic, to say the least. Repairs on the Excalibur are going well, even slightly ahead of schedule. The paperwork resulting from finding the cure seems endless, but I hope the worst is over."

"Dr. Chambers and Alwyn are working on the production of the permanent viral screen with other scientists. Sarah's trying to bury herself in work to avoid feeling the pain, grief, and guilt over the death of her entire Medbay staff." I paused, as for a moment I suddenly found myself standing outside Medbay again when my Captain had opened the doors. I still felt sick at the memory, and I knew it would haunt me for a long time to come. "I'm glad Alwyn is there for her, and I hope he'll be able to help her get through it. Matthew is still blaming himself for what happened, although Captain Ivanova exonerated him completely. I wish I could help him more, but he has to find his own way. All I can do is be there for him. And it's the least I can do, after everything he's done for me."

Matthew Gideon had been the only Captain in the fleet willing to have a telepath on his crew. He'd risked a lot, not only then, but also when he promoted me to be his First Officer after Commander Molinari's untimely death in a rock-fall on a small planet out on the deep range. Matthew never admitted it, but I knew that Earthforce had rapped his knuckles quite vehemently for choosing a teep, especially since he'd confronted them with the fait accompli. He'd claimed that we'd had problems with our communication equipment at the time, and he couldn't wait longer to appoint a new XO, since we were in the middle of a mission.

I can still see Molinari's corpse lying under the rubble...

I was on the rescue team, leading one of several groups searching, and I was the one who found her body. It wasn't a pretty sight, and for weeks afterwards, I'd wake up in a sweat after seeing that picture in my dreams. Her body was covered with bruises and cuts, and medical scans showed that she had multiple fractures all over her upper body, as well as a cracked skull. Her legs had been crushed by a large rock.

I felt sick, but I managed to suppress my feelings and concentrate on clearing the rubble off her corpse, with the help of others. Molinari had never really warmed to me, along with many others on the crew, but she'd always been fair. However, I'd sometimes suspected that was only because she knew Gideon would space her if he found her treating me differently from the 'mundane' crew members. I just hoped that she'd died, or at least become unconscious, before she'd been crushed. No one deserved such a painful death.

Gideon had taken a long hard look at her still, twisted body, his face a mask. Looking up from where I knelt beside our XO's corpse, I saw the pain and grief in his eyes before he closed them. Although I kept my shields up as high as I could to keep out the emotional turmoil emanating from my crew mates, I felt his guilt. For the first time, I fully realized what a burden a Commanding Officer had to carry. Later, I couldn't help but think that this incident, in addition to what had happened to the Cerberus, was one reason why our reckless Captain led most landing parties himself. He always took the blame for the injury or death of a crewmember, even if he couldn't have done anything to prevent it. Many of his quirks and behaviors must have been the result of those incidents.

Being a teep, I knew that I had been lucky to get as far as I had, so I never expected to be considered for a higher rank. I had always striven to be as close to the 'perfect officer' as I could. I knew that as one of the first telepaths who'd been allowed to work in a 'normal' profession, and especially as the first telepath in Earthforce, I'd have to surpass the achievements of my 'mundane' peers to get the same degree of recognition. The hostility of most people, open or covert, didn't help, but then again, I had almost always been lonely since the Corps had separated me from my parents.

I suspected Gideon knew about my problems, since after a while I realized he often gave me assignments

that forced me to deal with people who were prejudiced against teeps. He didn't do that to torture me, but to make me face them, their fears and prejudices--to try and break the invisible barrier between me and the other crew members. I was determined not to disappoint my Captain. I soon found that humor helped overcome a lot of prejudices, and step by step, I at least earned the crew's grudging respect, if not their friendship. There were still people who didn't hide their dislike of 'my kind', but I knew I'd always have to live with that. Gideon became my mentor, discreetly helping and coaching me in more ways than I could count. But it had still come as a complete surprise when Gideon gave me a field promotion to full Lieutenant and First Officer.

Several days after that horrible accident, Gideon called me to his office, and after discussing some trivial report I had written, he'd suddenly taken something out of his drawer and put it on the desk in front of me. I'd just stared at the Lieutenant's bars at first, then glanced up at him quizzically, not comprehending what this was about.

"They're yours," Gideon had said with a grin, though in his eyes I could still see a shadow of pain. "Congratulations. You've been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, and you will serve as my Executive Officer, effective immediately." His grin had grown wider as I'd just sat there with an open mouth, staring at him. "Cat got your tongue?"

I swallowed. "I...thank you. I…I never thought..."

"Exactly. Your performance is by far the best--almost too close to perfect sometimes, Lieutenant. You should learn to relax a little more. But the point is, you're not out for your own career. You always think of the mission and the crew first, and that's what I need in my XO. Sigurdson may be as good as you are, but he's an arrogant bastard who only thinks of himself and his future. So if I were in your position, I'd be careful around him for a while." A slight smile played around Gideon's lips as he got up and took the bars off the desk, walking around it.

I immediately stood to attention, and he attached the Lieutenant bars to my uniform. I saluted him, almost overwhelmed with the emotions that made my voice raw. "Thank you, Sir. I won't disappoint you."

"I know." The Captain saluted back, then held out his hand, and before I could protest, he said, "I wouldn't have done this if I didn't trust you, John." I strengthened my shields and shook his hand, realizing as I looked into his warm, sincere hazel eyes that maybe, just maybe, I had finally found a friend.

And I had been right. Throughout the years I had served under him, Matthew had supported and helped me, in more ways than I could count. I would never be able to find words strong enough to express how grateful I was or to pay off my debt, so I tried to pay him back in kind, by being the best XO he could ever have.

I shook my head, concentrating on the present again, and continued with my personal log. "We received a heroes' welcome. I'm glad President Sheridan did his best to give us as much privacy as possible in the onrush of the media. Every time I turn on the TV, no matter what channel, they are talking about us, showing excerpts from the press conference, or interviews with one of our crew." I chuckled. "Suddenly, everybody wants to talk to us, even to me, the Teep Hero. And yet, despite all the attention and interest, despite all the messages of thanks and congratulations we get, and amidst the feelings of gratefulness and jubilation, I've never felt more alone."

I gently, carefully, let go of my emotional control, and immediately felt the pain of separation rise inside me again. I let it go, let it wash through every fiber of my being, until the waves had ebbed to the level of a constant, but not overwhelming ache.

Finally, I continued, "Every journalist's favorite questions for me are, 'How does it feel to be a hero and role model for all the other telepaths out there? What advice can you give them?' My answer is that just like everybody else on this ship, I did what I had to do and always gave my best, and that if everybody, telepath or 'normal', would do that, we could overcome all our problems and achieve our goals, live our dreams. That they should never give up, because there is always something you can do."

Staring up at the ceiling, I saw four faces looking back at me, just as they had when I'd got their last message, a few days before. I'd seen that the twins had grown a lot since my previous call several weeks earlier. Lily had looked more beautiful than ever and had told me about the latest happenings on Eriadne. I could tell that Luke was feeling guilty about leaving his sister, Sara, alone when he told me about his last call to her, even though he was somewhat consoled that she seemed to be happy with his friend, Steve Roberts. Longing tore at my heart again, and I took a deep breath.

"And yet, countless times during the last year, I was very close to giving up myself. I still don't know what will happen now that we've found the cure. President Sheridan is talking with Matthew right now, about a mission he has in mind for us, but..." I swung myself up and stood, starting to pace, as once again I could feel my loneliness rush in on me. I would gladly have swapped all the attention I had gotten lately for a single minute alone with my family. "I can't imagine any mission that will allow us to be with our families..."

I closed my eyes and heaved a heavy sigh. "I've prepared my resignation from Earthforce. I only have to date and sign it. But I owe it to Matthew to wait until I know what the mission will be. He promised me that he'd find a way, and he always keeps his word. In this case, I'm afraid that even for a gambler like Matthew, the odds against him are too high. But I'll wait. I never would have believed I could be in Earthforce either, but now I am, so...I'll wait. I trust him to do everything and anything he can. He's made the impossible possible more times than I can count."

As I opened my eyes again, they were drawn to the cube resting on my nightstand, and I took it in my hand, touching each corner in turn, looking at the changing pictures, until I stopped at the last one, showing Lily, Luke, and me with the twins in our arms. I lifted the cube and pressed a soft kiss to the image of my lovers and children, and as I did that, I heard Lily's voice say, "*The future isn't written in stone.*"

I looked down at her image for a while, musing.

"So if the future is written in clay instead, and is only fixed once it turns from present to past, I hope that my thoughts, dreams and desire of finally being, *living*, with you, are strong and persistent enough to shape that future." Letting my fingers run over their faces inside the cube, I whispered, "I love you, and we *will* be together, no matter where and how, but we will. I swear it on my life and my love for you."

I lay down on the bed, curling up in a fetal position and cradling the cube against my chest, holding on to it and my hopes tightly.

I must have fallen asleep, as the door buzzer awakened me. At first I felt a slight disorientation, but when the buzzer sounded again, I sat up and put the cube onto the nightstand. "Who is it?"

"It's me."

For a few moments I just sat there, feeling my stomach doing a flip-flop and my heart starting to beat faster. But I forced myself to clamp down on my anxiety, and to get up and walk to the door. When I opened it, I found Matthew standing outside, leaning against the doorframe with one hand, the other on his hip. He looked at me seriously, then shifted and stepped into my quarters.

Gideon turned to lean against my desk, giving me a probing look while he chewed the inside of his lip, and his silence began to unnerve me.

"*What?*" I asked, not daring to form a complete sentence, for fear my emotions would go wild. Matthew's being here could only mean the meeting with Sheridan was over, so it probably had to do with our new mission.

He gazed at me for a moment longer, then finally spoke. "I've come straight from the meeting with Sheridan," he paused, studying my face very carefully, like a predator. "You already prepared your resignation, didn't you?"

My heart sank, and I couldn't stand it anymore. "Matthew, PLEASE! Just get it over with!"

Matthew didn't flinch. "OK." He paused, then said, "Shred it."

I blinked, then stared at my Captain and friend. "What?" Somehow, I seemed to have gotten stuck on that word.

"I said 'shred it'. I know your birthday is tomorrow, but I have an early present for you." Matthew broke into a wide, wolfish grin.

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